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GOLD-DUST DAN'S SNAP-SHOT



CAPTAIN BLACK RODE INTO THE STREAM, CLOSELY FOLLOWED BY LANDLORD JERRY AND SLICK SID.

OR, THE

Deadwood Speculator'S BLIND.

BY JOHN W. OSBON,

AUTHOR OF THE "GOLD DUST DAN" NOVELS,
"PLUCKY PAUL," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE ESCAPE.

"My God! The gas is escaping, the balloon is collapsing, and we are lost!"

That terrified cry burst from the lips of one of two men crouching in the bottom of the car attached to a balloon sweeping swiftly through the air above the eastern peaks of the Black Hills.

The first of these men, the one uttering that

fearful cry, was a tall, well-built fellow, whose garb and weapons, no less than the sable half-mask covering the upper part of his face, stamped him as an outlaw.

And the second, a tall, sinewy, well-formed man, was arrayed in a full suit of buckskin, which had been dyed a bright scarlet. His sombrero, of the same striking color, was looped up on one side with a massive gold star, and ornamented with a triple cord of gold and a single long black ostrich plume. Gold spurs were at the heels of his high cavalry boots, and his rifle and revolvers were ornate with the same precious metal. A broad sash of black silk encircled his waist, and on each shoulder, worn as an epaulet, was the dried forefoot of a huge panther.

This singular-looking being was an outlaw, and a leader of outlaws. Under the name of Red Panther, he had for months past been the terror of camp and trail throughout the Black Hills.

It was shortly after midday, and the October sun was shining brightly.

Below, and to the southwest, lay the mining camp of Gold Gulch. There, mere pygmies in the distance, men were running to and fro, some mounted, others afoot, and all fiercely excited.

Again that wild, agonized cry rang out:

"The gas is escaping! The balloon is sinking! We are lost! We are doomed!"

"Silence, fool!" sternly commanded Red Panther, calmly rising and bending a searching look on the distant camp. "Is it not enough that we have escaped the rope? Death in any other guise should have no terrors for us!"

"By Heavens! Those devils are mounting to pursue us!"

"Now, up with you, Bill Bickstaff, and empty a bag or two of the ballast, for we must keep afloat till we are beyond the sight of Gold Dust Dan and his accursed allies, be the end what it may!"

But the fellow did not stir, and the man in red glared viciously at the cowering wretch.

"Perdition take you for a cowardly cur, Bill Bickstaff! Will you obey, or shall I send us both to death swift and sure?"

"See!" drawing his knife and severing one of the ropes supporting the car. "One—two—three! As many more, Bill Bickstaff, and we will drop from the clouds together!"

"Stop! For God's sake, stop!" screamed the affrighted outlaw, springing to his feet.

"You will obey me?"

"Yes! yes!"

"Then out with the ballast! The balloon is slowly settling, and those sharp-eyed devils have seen it. We must hazard all on keeping afloat."

Mechanically Bickstaff hurled two of the bags of sand overboard. The balloon shot upward a hundred feet.

"Good! Courage, now, Bickstaff, and we'll triumph yet! I have a plan. It is simple, but will succeed if we land in safety. And now, Bill, I want your clothes, quick!"

Bickstaff hesitated.

"Quick, I say!" And again the knife in Red Panther's hand was poised threateningly above the nearest of the three remaining ropes.

Off came the desperado's boots, his hat, and then his other outer clothing.

Red Panther, in turn, hurriedly discarded his peculiar garb, including the huge red beard and the wig of flowing red hair.

"Now, Bill, into my clothes with you! And while you're about it, I'll get into yours!"

"But, captain—"

"Not a word, Bill! I know what you're going to say, and as you're sworn to obey me, you'd better leave it unsaid!"

"The simple truth is, I intend to trade identities with you, on the chance that we may reach the earth alive. To all outward appearances, you will then be the notorious and much-sought-for Red Panther, while I shall masquerade as the unassuming but none the less desperate Bill Bickstaff."

"A hot pursuit will of course be made, but as you know every nook and corner of the Hills, you can lead Gold Dust Dan a long chase, and in the end elude him at will, while I, as the lesser scoundrel, will attract but little attention."

"Do you grasp the situation, Bill?"

"I—I understand, captain! It is a terrible test you put me to!"

A very few minutes sufficed to complete that hurried metamorphosis, and then, as he clapped on Bickstaff's black beard and wig, Red Panther again gazed in the direction of the gold camp.

"We are in luck, Bill!" he cried, jubilantly. "The camp has faded, and our pursuers are no longer in sight!"

"But we are sinking, captain! Sinking fast!" returned Bickstaff, in fresh alarm.

"Then out with that ballast!" sharply cried Red Panther, opening a trap in the bottom of the basket and paying out a stout rope with a grapnel attached. "Aha! Up we go again, and over the canyon!"

Even as the outlaw spoke, the flukes of the grapnel caught firmly in the projecting roots of a gigantic pine standing on the very brink of the precipitous canyon wall; at the same instant the balloon mounted with the velocity of a rocket, and the grapnel rope tightened with a sharp snap.

A ripping, rending sound, a hoarse cry of terror from each of the men, and the great silken bag split from bottom to top!

Downward shot the car into the top of the pine, and thence, bottom up, into the depths of the canyon!

The two men were hurled violently into the topmost branches of the pine—Red Panther to grasp at his frail support and save himself, the ill-fated Bickstaff to plunge head first after the wrecked airship.

Steadying himself in his swaying perch, the outlaw chief slowly and carefully made his way to the ground.

A single glance over the verge, and he drew back, shivering in every fiber.

"My God! My presentiment was true! I have escaped, while Bickstaff has perished! As Red Panther, he will be left for the coyotes to feed upon! Nevermore shall I appear as Red Panther—nevermore as Jake Rose! From this day forth I shall have no other object, till I am revenged on Gold Dust Dan!"

CHAPTER II.

CAPTAIN BLACK.

"Hands up, pilgrims! This is a toll road, and he who falls to pay finds a grave by the wayside!"

It was on a lonely trail leading into Deadwood from the south. In the middle of the narrow, winding path stood the toll-taker, a stalwart, heavily-bearded fellow, the upper half of his face hidden by a black mask, in each hand a cocked and levelled revolver.

Confronting him at a distance not greater than ten feet were two men, splendidly mounted, and each leading a stout pack animal.

"By Heavens! It's poor picking you'll find this crowd, Sir Robber, barring our horses and camp outfit!" exclaimed the smaller of the two, bitterly.

"Horseflesh is valuable," was the significant response. "Unbuckle and throw aside your belt of arms, each of you, and dismount."

Sullenly the two men obeyed.

"This hyar is durned tough luck, Sid!" grumbled the larger.

"The worst I ever saw, Landlord Jerry. But we can't kick, as it's only getting back at us with our own game."

The road agent started, and a grim smile curled his bearded lips.

"Hold! both of you!" he ordered, sternly. "Know ye, I am Captain Black, of the Deadwood trails, and I'm strictly business from A to izzard! Your names, pilgrims!"

"Oh, I'm Sidney Glover, a prospector in mighty hard luck," the smaller man retorted.

"An' I'm Jeremiah Timkins, ditto," growled his burly companion.

"And liars, both of you!" Captain Black exclaimed. "Think you to deceive me!"

"You, Sidney Glover, are Sidney Graft, other wise Sleek Sid! Three days ago you were mayor of Gold Gulch, and a shining light in that camp!"

"And you, Br'er Timkins, are Jerry Longbridge, better known in Gold Gulch as plain Landlord Jerry."

"Both of you are infernal scoundrels, and are at this minute fugitives from justice."

"And you, Captain Black, are—yes, by Heavens! you are Bill Bickstaff!" cried Sidney Glover, or Graft, excitedly, as he gazed keenly at the outlaw.

"Nay, nay, Pauline; say not so," was the cool retort. "The gentleman you name has quitted this world."

"To tell the truth, I am the defunct Red Panther—the late lamented Jacob Rose!"

A howl of surprise and delight escaped the two men, and with one accord they sprang forward and warmly grasped the hands of the masked highwayman.

"Derned ef I ain't glad ter see ye, pard," cried Landlord Jerry, his oily face beaming with sinister joy. "I reckoned es how 'twas all up with you!"

"Shake, pardner! I thought I'd looked my last on Jake Rose!" Sleek Sid declared, with equal enthusiasm.

"Drop that name, please," uttered the road agent, warningly. "Let it and the other die. Remember, I am now Captain Black!"

"And now tell me, what is the news from Gold Gulch?"

"It's mighty little we know, cap'n," Jerry replied, with a vicious little nod. "About ther time you an' Bill jumped ther balloon, me an' Sid put out afoot, es we diskivered thet, owin' to ther presence o' Gold Dust Dan an' his gang, ther climate 'round ther Gulch war gittin' deuced on-healthy for us."

"And these horses and the outfit?"

"They're ours, 'cause we took 'em," grinned the ruffians.

"We held up a couple of galoots about ten miles back," Sleek Sid explained. "We were heading toward Deadwood, to work the trails running into camp, and we tackled the job just to get our hands in. But, now that we've met you, we'll call our plans off, and again follow your lead."

"Well, I think we may be able to do a little business together," Captain Black remarked, after a moment's reflection. "I'll tell you plainly, though, that I'm out for revenge as well as gold, and as soon as I'm squarely on my feet again I'm going for Gold Dust Dan. If you're with me on that ticket well and good; if not, we'll part right here with no hard feelings!"

"Oh, we're with ye right thar, cap'n—dead sure!" Landlord Jerry asseverated with no little vehemence. "Ye kin count on us ev'ry time!"

"Thet you can," supplemented Sleek Sid, emphatically. "Gold Dust Dan must die!"

"Good, my bravos! With three against one, we can overmatch the detective hound with all his cunning!"

"Come, let us quit this trail and seek a snug retreat of mine, where we can talk over matters at leisure."

"We'll follow where you lead, you bet!" Landlord Jerry declared, enthusiastically, as he and Sleek Sid hastily remounted.

Captain Black led the way as rapidly as the tangled undergrowth would permit, and in a few minutes halted beside a shallow, swiftly-flowing stream.

"Wait here a moment," he requested, in a guarded voice, and then disappeared in a dense thicket, from which he shortly emerged leading a small, dingy looking mule.

"This ancient critter isn't mine; it belongs to an old and tried friend, a secret member of the band, to whom I'll presently introduce you. But now, let's get on again," and, seating himself astride the bare back of the mule, Captain Black rode into the stream, closely followed by Landlord Jerry and Sleek Sid.

For upwards of an hour the trio followed the winding course of the stream to the southward; but, finally quitting it, Captain Black led the way across a stony waste, and thence around the base of a towering hill to a lone cabin built against the face of an overhanging bluff.

"There's the den, and a right snug den it is," he announced, with a flourish, as he abruptly drew rein and dismounted.

"And now, boys, a word of warning before I call our friend. He's an oddity, just a remove better than a born idiot, and terribly misshapen; but you must treat him with the utmost respect, and appear not to notice his deformity. He is easily offended, and his anger is frightful; but he is a valuable ally. So be careful, for we can ill afford to cross him."

"You may trust us, captain," assured Sleek Sid.

"Thet ye kin," Landlord Jerry chuckled. "I'll be meek es mutton."

Captain Black now placed a small wooden whistle to his lips, and blew three short, sharp blasts.

At the third call the cabin door noiselessly opened, and a man stepped out into the moonlight.

A hunchback—a dwarf less than four feet in height, with a huge head set upon a long and slender neck. His shoulders were broad and massive, and his crooked, sinewy arms of unusual length; his body was short and full, and his legs and feet shared in his general ugliness and deformity.

A mass of long, straight black hair covered his head and descended in stiff, harsh wisps upon the hump between his shoulders, while a bristling black beard covered his face to his eyes.

And, as if to heighten his grotesque appearance, this unfortunate creature had clothed himself in a suit of military blue, gay with gilt braid and brass buttons, and wore upon each shoulder an epaulet, while a broad red sash encircled his squat, misshapen figure. A cocked hat, crested with eagle feathers, long buff gauntlets, and high-topped cavalry boots, with big brass spurs jingling at the heels, completed his attire.

A saber clanked dismally at his side, and in his hands was a repeating rifle.

"I salute you, General Grim!" cried the outlaw chief, inclining himself profoundly as the hunchback moved forward.

"I welcome your return, captain," the latter responded, with an absurd flourish. "I trust that your venture has been crowned with success."

"It has, indeed, my dear general; though I return with pockets empty as ever, yet

I have had the exceedingly good fortune to fall in with two old and tried friends.

"General Grim, I have the honor to introduce Mr. Sleek Sid and Mr. Landlord Jerry, both of whom are members of our secret league and worthy of every consideration at your hands."

The hunchback peered sharply at the two rascals, then leered cunningly, and bade them welcome.

"You know the way to the stables, my noble captain," he continued, turning his glittering black eyes to the face of the outlaw chief. "May I beg that you excuse me while you put up the horses? Matters within the cabin demand my attention."

Captain Black's brows gathered in an ominous scowl beneath his mask, and he darted a searching, suspicious glance at the general, who merely nodded, turned and re-entered the cabin.

"Come, pards," exclaimed the captain, abruptly confronting his allies. "The general has said the truth; he is needed in the cabin, on a matter heretofore a sealed secret between him and myself, but which I shall now disclose, as it may have an important bearing on our future course."

In silence the two outlaws followed their chief.

CHAPTER III.

THE TRAGEDY.

General Grim's stable proved to be a cavern of considerable extent. It was but a short distance from the cabin, and was entered through a narrow fissure hidden by a mass of hanging vines.

When back of this screen of foliage, Captain Black produced and lighted a lantern, and led the way inward. It required but few minutes to dispose of the animals and their trappings.

"Now, pards, we must make a thorough canvas of the situation before we return to that doubled and twisted wretch at the cabin," the chief averred, putting down the lantern and seating himself upon a ledge in one of the walls. "For the first time I distrust the gentleman, and if I find anything in his conduct to verify my suspicions his road shall be a short one."

"An' sarve 'im right, too!" Landlord Jerry declared, with a vicious nod.

"To explain the cabin secret, I must ask you to recall in detail this Gold Gulch affair," pursued Captain Black. "It is now nearly a year since we jumped the Bradlow-Bennet claim, but you both doubtless remember the features of that double light, and of the later desperate struggle to obtain the secret of the buried treasure. For a time success seemed to be with us, but, through the devotion of Gold Dust Dan to the beautiful Media Bradlow, we have at last been routed, losing both the mines and the hidden gold we had hoped to secure."

"So complete and crushing has been our defeat, that it would seem sheer madness even to plan a second attempt; yet with Gold Dust Dan out of the way, we would win, for in the cabin secret lies the key to the situation."

"You will recall that, at the time we jumped the claim, Bradlow and Bennet succeeded in escaping, but later returned with a strong force to retake the mine. In that tussle Bennet received his death wound, while Bradlow was reported killed."

"But such was not the case. He was wounded, badly wounded, but, knowing of the buried treasure, I conceived the idea of wringing the secret from him, and to that end removed him from the field under cover of night and brought him here, leaving in his stead the body of one of our own men dressed in Bradlow's

clothes, and from that day to this he has been under the keeping of General Grim in a small cavern back of yonder cabin."

"That, pards, is the cabin secret, and it is something connected with it that compels the hunchback's presence there."

"Come! We will beard the lion in his lair, and learn the meaning of it all."

And springing to his feet, Captain Black hastily quitted the stables, with his allies at his heels.

General Grim met them at the cabin door.

"Welcome, gentlemen!" the hunchback cried. "My home is at your disposal."

The outlaw, entering, seated himself at the table, where he beckoned his allies to join him.

"And now, my dear general, you will kindly fetch us something to eat," he ordered, laying aside his mask. "While we are eating, you must station yourself outside, ten paces from the door, to guard against surprise."

The hunchback mutely obeyed.

By the time the meal was ended the villainous trio had completed their plans.

Two of the horses were then brought from the cavern, saddled and bridled. Captain Black and Sleek Sid mounted and rode away, the former laying his course toward Rapid City, the latter taking the Deadwood trail, while Landlord Jerry remained at the cabin with the hunchback.

It is three weeks later. Along a rough trail winding away to the magic city of Deadwood, two horsemen are riding side by side. Both are well armed and well mounted, but there all points of similarity cease.

One is a young man, and, if appearances count for anything, he is a professional man.

The other is a thorough Westerner, tall and sinewy, old and rugged, and is garbed after the manner peculiar to the region.

Their trail led into a canyon, and as they neared the jaws of the gloomy opening the young man turned to his companion with the query:

"How far are we from Deadwood, Mint?"

"Ten miles or nigh about, Mr. Cokely. Barrin' a bresh with ther road agents, we'd orter reach thar now inside o' a couple o' hours, fer ther critters are in prime condition an' ther trail ain't bad."

"You still think, then, that we may have trouble?"

"Ther odds are thet we shell. It's said Captain Black holds ev'ry trail inter Deadwood, an' thet nothin' escapes his net. I only hope, sir, thet ye took my advice an' fetched mighty little money with ye."

"The vultures would never grow fat off the contents of my purse! But the papers, Mint—I have them. They could not well be left behind, and if need be we must fight to keep them."

"Ye kin 'pend on old Mint Mason, youngster. Mebbe—"

The crash of several repeating rifles checks the guide, and under that leaden hail both men fall from their saddles, wounded unto death.

"The fools! They pronounced their own doom!" exclaimed a harsh voice, and with the words a masked man stepped out from the denser shadows of the canyon. "They thought to cheat Captain Black!"

"Up, boys, and secure the prize, for those papers must be valuable!"

Deadwood the restless, Deadwood the turbulent, was in a fever of excitement.

In the streets, on the corners, in all places of public resort, there was but one topic—the ravages of the bold road agent, Captain Black, and a movement afoot against him.

Flaming posters challenged the eye on every trail leading out of the metropolis; the huge black letters stared at you on every corner, and the same grim greeting held the post of honor in every store, saloon and gambling hell in the bustling mining city:

\$1,000 REWARD.

The above amount in gold has been deposited by the undersigned with the authorities of Deadwood, and will by them be paid to the person or persons delivering up, dead or alive, the body of the notorious road agent, Captain Black.

Or, one-half of the above amount will be paid for information that will lead to the arrest of the said outlaw.

(Signed) AUSTIN RANSOME.

Austin Ransome was a newcomer and capitalist in Deadwood, having been in the place little more than a week.

He had suffered severe financial losses at the hands of Captain Black while making his way to Deadwood, and was perhaps the most bitter of that outlaw's numerous enemies. Indeed, in addition to offering the reward mentioned, Ransome had himself organized, equipped and sent out a party to scour the hills in search of the dashing toll-taker.

Early in the evening of the day on which this party quitted the Black Hills metropolis, Ransome and the Mayor of Deadwood were closeted in the former's office, discussing the move and its probable result.

This conference had lasted something more than an hour, and was nearing a close, when the office door was flung open and a man stepped briskly into the room.

Huge spurs on his heels jingled with each step, and he had the appearance of one just from the saddle.

"Hallo! Hallo!" exclaimed Ransome, springing to his feet. "Buckskin, you're just the man we want to see."

"Well, boss, you can feast your eyes, I reckon."

"You're just back from Gold Gulch?"

"You've hit it, boss. I'm not three minutes from the saddle."

"Did you succeed in finding Gold Dust Dan?"

"You bet! And I gave him your letter, boss."

"He will come?"

"Bar accidents, he'll be here to-morrow."

Ransome turned to the Mayor.

"Luck is certainly with us!" he cried, exultantly. "With Gold Dust Dan to lead our men, I feel that the audacious Captain Black cannot fail to come to grief in short order."

"I certainly hope so," returned the Mayor, rising. "In any event, you may be assured of my hearty co-operation."

With that the official departed.

When the door had closed behind him, Buckskin drew a small parcel from his pocket and tossed it to Ransome, saying:

"Papers, boss, and valuable, I reckon!"

CHAPTER IV.

A TIMELY MEETING.

Just at noon, one day, a lone horseman spurred into Gold Gulch, and drew rein and dismounted at The Mint, the single hotel in the camp.

At that hour the street was deserted, but the rapid clatter of hoofs had caught the landlord's ear, and he at once came bustling to the door.

"Hitch, stranger, an' come right in!

Thar's a mighty good lay-out o' grub jest in sight, an' I'll send a man ter look arter ther critter."

"First, though, let me ask you a question. Is there a man known as Gold Dust Dan in this camp?"

"Thar 'is, stranger."

"Where can I find him?"

"You can find him right here, sir, for I am Gold Dust Dan," and with the words, a tall, handsome youth stepped past the landlord and confronted the stranger.

"I, sir, am George Cutter, better known in and around Deadwood as Buckskin. I am here to see you on a matter of business, in which I have the honor to represent the Mayor of Deadwood."

"Indeed! Then, sir, I am glad to meet you," and Gold Dust Dan frankly extended his hand, while his dark eyes earnestly scanned the face of the courier.

"I am the bearer of a letter from his honor," pursued Buckskin, drawing the missive from an inner pocket. "I am instructed to deliver it to you, receive your answer, and then return to Deadwood."

"Very well. I will read the letter and have the answer ready in an hour from now."

"That will suit me, sir," and Buckskin hurried into the hotel, followed by the landlord.

Alone, Gold Dust Dan opened and read the letter.

A puzzled look came over his face.

"Upon my soul, this is strange!" he ejaculated. "Ransome—Austin Ransome! The name is new to me, and I'm quite sure I don't know the man; but his request is indorsed by Deadwood's Mayor, and so must be bona fide, odd as it is."

At that moment the landlord reappeared, followed by a man to take charge of the courier's horse, and as soon as the latter had disappeared with the animal, Dan said:

"Idaho!"

"Wal, Gold Dust?"

"I want your candid opinion of this Buckskin."

"A shark, Dan'l—a bloody spirit!"

"Exactly! We agree to a dot, Idaho! Read that!"

Idaho complied with the request, then said:

"It seems all straight, Dan'l."

"Pard, that's what puzzles me. It seems straight, but it has come through bad hands."

"Are you goin', Dan'l?"

"Yes, I'll go to-morrow. It's a good offer, and I'm foolish enough to admit I'd like a joust with this Captain Black."

"It may be a trap?"

"Whose, Idaho?"

"Some o' Red Panther's gang. Ye know a lot o' ther critters slipped away at ther big clean-out."

"I can hardly believe it is a trap, for that is certainly the Mayor's signature appended to the letter."

"Take an' ole fool's advice, Dan'l, an' play safe on ther game. When Buckskin leaves, foller an' keep him in sight. 'Twon't do no harm, an' it may pan out big."

"I shall try to use such precautions as will make it an extremely difficult matter to spring a trap on me."

"Wal, Dan'l, I hope ther thing'll twist around all right," and shaking his head dubiously, the landlord walked away.

A moment later Buckskin came out of the hotel, and Gold Dust Dan at once advanced to meet him.

"You leave when?" he asked.

"As soon as I have your answer."

"I have not fully decided as yet, as there are some points on which I am ig-

norant. Let me ask how long have you been in Deadwood?"

"About a month, sir."

"And Austin Ransome?"

"He came a w ek ago to-day."

"Can you tell me anything about him, Buckskin?"

"Very little, sir. He is from Chicago, and came to Deadwood from Silver City. On the way the hearse was held up and Ransome was robbed of several thousand dollars. He swore to get square with Captain Black, and to that end has organized the party which you are requested to lead."

"When is this party to leave Deadwood?"

"At the earliest possible moment."

"How long has this Captain Black been operating?"

"I first heard of him, sir, a few days after I arrived in Deadwood."

"Has he a large band?"

"He is said to have a strong following, with spies in Deadwood and all the camps."

"What estimate would you put upon him?"

"He is undoubtedly a big gun, sir—and strictly business from the word go."

"Well, Buckskin, you may make a verbal report. Say I will confer with the Mayor in person and will leave here not later than noon to-morrow."

Buckskin nodded and turned away. Half an hour later he galloped out of Gold Gulch on his return to Deadwood.

A night and a day had passed, when an armed man, mounted on a splendid black horse, could have been seen coursing swiftly along a gloomy trail, heading toward the Black Hills metropolis.

This horseman was Gold Dust Dan.

For reasons best known to himself, the young knight errant had discounted the time stated to Buckskin, and had quitted Gold Gulch just five hours after the latter had ridden away.

Suddenly there came the sharp crash of a volley in the distance.

Gold Dust Dan instantly drew rein and dismounted.

"Easy, Prince!" he exclaimed, in a low voice. "Those rifle shots tell a tragic story, I fear, and we must reconnoiter."

Leading the horse aside from the trail Dan secured him in a clump of low-growing pines, and then hurried onward with swift, noiseless steps.

Nearly a quarter of a mile had he thus proceeded, when, pausing a moment to listen, he was startled by the sharply uttered command:

"Mount, boys, and away! Our work is done!"

Then there came the sound of hasty, shuffling steps, the jingling of spurs, and the steady beat of hoofs.

At this latter sound Dan shrank deeper into his leafy covert beside the trail. The riders were coming toward him. They were road agents, perhaps the dreaded band of Captain Black.

Crouching close to the earth, a cocked revolver in each hand, Dan waited in motionless suspense until the last of the evil cohort had thundered by; then he arose and stepped forth into the trail.

At the same instant the bushes on the opposite side were parted, and the dark outlines of a man appeared.

Dan promptly raised his revolver to a level.

"Throw up your hands!" he ordered, sternly.

"Mud cats an' houn' pups! Ef I hain't gone an' jobbed myself onto a con-jemmed misfortune, may Pepper kick me ter weenty-bits, b'gosh!" and with the lament up went the fellow's hands.

"Sa-ay, pard, this hyar's a putty rough deal on an ole galoot like me, fer I've got rheumatics in both shoulders, an' ev'ry time I swings an arm I creak all over. Fact. An' I'm on'y a mere shadder—a ghost, seekin' a quiet spot fer ther obseekies, an'—an'—"

"Who in tarnalation are you?"

"I'm Gold Dust Dan."

"Gold Dust Dan! Gold Dust! an' ringin' in this hyar bluff on me! Dan'l Dan'l! Ye'll break my heart, b'gosh! Didn't know me—didn't know Ole Calamity!"

Dan laughed, the old ranger chuckled, and then the two shook hands.

CHAPTER V.

THE DYING LAWYER'S STATEMENT.

"What are you doing up here, you miserable old fraud?" asked Dan, as they clasped hands.

"I kem out ter play nuss ter an infant, b'gosh! Ye see, yisterday, down t' ther Gulch, Idaho kem ter me, an' he sez, sez he, 'Calamity, thet kid's puttin' hisself in the way of an orful spankin'.' An' I sez, sez I, 'How so?' 'Goin' ter 'Deadwood ter play hide-an'-seek 'ith Captain Black,' sez he. 'Sho!' sez I. 'Ye don't mean et!' Sez he, 'I do.'"

"And so he had you follow me?"

"Nope! He sent me ter foller Buckskin, an' then let you foller me, an' 'chixt us, Dan'l, 'twan't a bad move, es ets panned out."

"Why so? Have you discovered something?"

"I've diskivered thet Buckskin are a road agent, ef not Captain Black in person, b'gosh!"

"Exactly! I had reached a conclusion similar to that myself. But go on, Calamity. Tell me how you discovered the fact."

"Wal, I left the Gulch ahead of Buckskin, rode out five mile, waited in a thicket till he'd passed, then muffled Pepper's hoofs an' follered him, keepin' him jest in sight till dark, then closin' up till I c'u'd hear ev'ry cluck of his hoss's feet. About three o'clock this mornin' he camped a couple of hours ter give his hoss a breathin' spell, then was up an' at it ag'in, with no let-up till four this evenin', when he left ther trail an' jined a gang o' outlaws in waitin' near by."

"You are sure they were outlaws, Calamity?"

"Sartin, Dan'l. Honest men don't hide their faces behind bandanners an' ther like."

"Howsomever, when Buckskin jined ther outfit, he got a fresh mount, tied a mask onto his face, an' then headed ther gang this way. I follered till I seed 'em lay an ambush in ther gulch jest ahead, then putt back ter warn their victim, but was too late."

"Thet, Dan'l, is ther case, jest es et stands, an' I reckon we'd better push on an' see ef we kin ondo eny o' ther mischief."

"That was my errand when I encountered you."

Silently the two men glided forward a few paces, when the body of a man blocked the way.

"The devils have made sure work of it, I'm afraid," exclaimed Dan, as he bent forward in a vain attempt to read the face of the prostrate man. "Lend a hand, Calamity, and we'll move him out of this gloomy pit."

"No, no! Do not move me, for I am dying!" interposed a faint voice. "I feared you were the road agents re-

turned to complete their work, but your words lead me to believe that you are honest men, and as such I have a favor to ask of you."

"It is granted, stranger, if it is anything within our power," Gold Dust Dan returned, in a sympathetic tone. "You may speak freely to us."

"I thank you. Listen closely, and try to fix firmly in mind what I say, for it is of the utmost importance to a young girl now somewhere in these hills, and may save the life of her brother, who is in the hands of his enemies."

"I am Melville A. Cokely, of the law firm of Black, Stone & Cokely, of Indianapolis, Indiana, and I came here in search of Media Bradlow. She—"

"I know the young lady—know her well," interrupted Dan, betraying deepened interest. "Her father and grandfather were killed a month or more ago by a band of outlaws and Indians."

"Yes. A meager press report of that unfortunate affair reached us some time since, and hastened my departure for this region, as we entertained grave fears for the girl's safety."

"You may ease your mind on that score, Mr. Cokely, for the young lady is surrounded by devoted friends."

"I am glad to hear that. Miss Bradlow has lately become the heir to a considerable fortune through the will of a miserly uncle long estranged from his family, and it is because of this money that I now fear peril threatens her, as all the papers relating to it were stolen from me by Captain Black not an hour since. I greatly fear that the audacious scoundrel will attempt to capture her, with a view to getting his hands on the fortune."

"We will do the best we can to guard against anything of the kind happening," assured Dan.

"I am growing weaker—"

His lips parted in a fluttering sigh, and in a faint whisper came the words:

"All is over! It is the end! See—Hampton. Send word to the firm, and tell—mother—"

"Gone!" murmured Old Calamity, mournfully, as he bared his bowed head.

"Another one is added ter ther long list o' misfortunates."

In grim silence the pards raised the lifeless body of the lawyer and carried it to a secluded spot beside the trail.

"Thar's another some'ars in ther gulch," averred Calamity, when that had been done. "I heard the critters comin' up the trail, an' they was two."

A brief search confirmed the truth of the old ranger's assertion. A few paces beyond the spot where Cokely had fallen lay the corpse of Mint Mason, the guide, and it was quickly placed beside that of his employer.

"Now, Dan'l, what's next? Hedn't we better git on ter Deadwood?"

"You had better return to Gold Gulch and warn Reckless Ray to look after the girl," Dan replied. "Like the lawyer, I am pretty firmly convinced she is in real danger."

"An' you?"

"I'll go on to Deadwood, and send out a party to bury these poor fellows."

"All right, Gold Dust. But you look out, fer ther hull business is a trap, an' ther critters back of et arn't fools. Now I'll go git Pepper, an' at ther fust peep o' day we'll backtrack ter ther Gulch. So long, pard."

The old ranger hurried away through the darkness, while Gold Dust Dan retraced his steps to secure his horse, which the youth mounted and started briskly toward Deadwood.

CHAPTER VI.

DAN AND THE SPECULATOR.

"Mr. Austin Ransome?"

"I am the man, sir. How can I be of service to you?" And the speculator narrowly eyed the muscular, well-knit figure confronting him.

"Well, sir, I am here in response to a letter from you, delivered to me by one known as Buckskin. I am Daniel Deerfoot, or Gold Dust Dan."

"Indeed!" Ransome exclaimed, warmly grasping the young plainsman's hand. "I am most glad to see you, Gold Dust Dan."

"But sit down, please, and we'll discuss my proposed campaign against Captain Black and close our compact," and Ransome conducted his visitor to a chair beside the table, then seated himself opposite, adding:

"Naturally, you must be somewhat curious to know the motives underlying the movement of mine."

"I am confident that you have reasons, urgent reasons, for entering the lists against this Captain Black."

"I have. Not only has Captain Black eased my purse of a heavy sum, but in him I recognize one who reddened his hands with the life blood of my only brother!"

"Indeed?"

"Yes, sir. The outlaw's real name is Felix Garne, and he committed this crime three years ago in a gambling hell in Peoria, Ill. Heavy rewards were offered, and the best of detectives employed, but from that day until I entered the Black Hills, never so much as an inkling of Felix Garne's whereabouts could I obtain."

"As you have doubtless learned, I am a speculator. I was drawn here by a flattering prospect, and brought with me some seven thousand dollars in cash. A few miles out of Deadwood the coach was held up and I was robbed. But in the chief of the marauders, despite his mask, I recognized Felix Garne."

"I immediately set about organizing a band of men of known courage, and it was upon the recommendation of Deadwood's mayor, warmly seconded by that prince of mountain detectives, Bolly Dorrit, that I sent for you to lead the party."

"I will pay you two hundred and fifty dollars a month for your services as chief; an extra two hundred and fifty if you close the campaign within a month, and a reward of one thousand dollars for the delivery of Felix Garne into the hands of the authorities, or one-half of that amount for indisputable proof of his death."

"What say you? Do you accept?"

"I accept. I will undertake to deliver Captain Black into the hands of the authorities."

"And now, may I ask where are your men encamped?"

"They are camped in a canyon off the Lone Pine trail, some seven miles south of Deadwood. I leave the matter in your hands, and to-morrow morning will accompany you down to the camp and make you acquainted with our men."

Thus, all being arranged, Gold Dust Dan quitted Ransome's office; but out in the darkened hallway a heavy hand was laid sharply upon Dan's shoulder, while in hoarse, wheezy tones came the whispered warning:

"On your life, not a word, Gold Dust Dan!"

"I must see you, and at once!"

CHAPTER VII.

THE VETERAN DETECTIVE.

Though startled, the young plainsman was by no means disconcerted. Swift as thought he drew his revolver and grimly faced the speaker.

"Very well—just set the pace!" he as guardedly returned, peering sharply at the dimly visible outlines of the bulky form facing him.

"Not hyar, Dan; not hyar!" wheezed the unknown, his hand slipping from the shoulder to the arm of the youth. "Putt up thet gun, an' foller yer pore but respectable uncle, please yer honor!"

"Bolly Dorrit, by the—"

"Bolivar Dorrit, Esq.—jest thet! Now hop along lively, fer thet black-whiskered fox in ther hes keen ears, es yer uncle knows ter his sorrow!"

"Meaning—"

"Ransome—nothin' less! Come!"

Dan silently followed.

Down the stairway and out into the street proceeded Bolly Dorrit, followed by Dan, and thence they tramped due south until the outskirts of Deadwood were reached.

"I've got a cabin over in ther bresh a leetle way. Reckon it's ther safest place ter hole-up fer a confab, eh?" suggested Dorrit.

"Just as you wish it, Bolly."

Something in the appearance and manner of Austin Ransome had early aroused Dan's suspicions that the speculator was not just what he represented himself to be; and now that Dorrit seemed imbued with much the same idea, the youth was most eager for a long talk with the detective.

At the end of a half-hour's walk, the pair entered the mouth of a narrow fissure in the side of a hill, and, a few minutes later, halted in front of a small cabin.

"Jest a pocket in ther hill, Dan'l, nothin' more nor less, with my shanty fer ther bottom," Dorrit explained, as he pushed open the cabin door and ignited a match. "Sot down an' be at home while I make a light, fer—"

"Holy Caesar!"

Swift upon that sharply drawn exclamation came a keen report, a blinding flash, and the sound of a heavy fall—then the sharply-uttered command from without:

"Up, boys, and close in! Raynor has killed the accursed detective, but his pard must not escape!"

Warned by that single shot of an ambush within the cabin, Gold Dust Dan had nimbly sprung back, to pause, revolvers in hand, just without the door; but that shrill rallying cry told only too plainly of danger, even there—that he was hemmed in!

Facing swiftly about until he felt the solid log wall at his back, the youth swung his revolvers to a level and opened fire at the half dozen shadowy forms just visible in the deep gloom of the ill-starred pocket.

Thrice, in as many seconds, those deadly weapons sent forth their sharply-ringing notes; and a screech of pain here and a muttered curse there attested only too plainly that at least two of those furious snap shots had not gone astray!

"Down—down! And snake your way in!" shouted the leader of the attacking party. "Down, and creep forward, and see that you spare no chance to kill that young catamount, for he is Gold Dust Dan!"

A furious yell followed this announcement, and the last of those dim and indistinct shapes disappeared as if swallowed up by the earth.

Then came silence, deep and oppressive, of several minutes' duration, which was broken at last by the sharp rasping voice of the leader:

"He's escaped, boys, by all that's bad!"

"But how?" snarled a second voice.

"He never went down an' out o' the pocket—kase he c'u'dn't; nor he didn't

go up the sides, fer them rocks 'u'd fool the feet of a goat. I'm tellin' ye, pards, he's still hyar, sumwhar!"

"But whar?" mocked a third voice.

"Mebbe he slipped into ther cabin," another suggested.

"Silence, all!" ordered the leader, sharply. "I'm firmly convinced the whelp's somewhere about, even now, listening to every word we utter. Stand guard, all just as you are, and shoot him down on sight."

"Benton—Davis, come with me!"

The two outlaws thus addressed promptly stepped forward, and followed the chief down the narrow pocket.

"Now, boys, set to and gather all the dry wood you can get your hands on. We'll have a monstrous bonfire, and methinks the light will reveal Mister Gold Dust Dan to our sight."

"Why not fire the cabin an' have done with it?" suggested one.

"True, Benton, I had not thought of that," was the quick response. "Then, too, to burn the cabin is the easier way."

Accordingly, the three hastened back to their waiting comrades, and, a moment later, a tiny flame leaped into view, to feed eagerly upon the dry log walls, and soon the fire became intense.

Step by step the outlaws retreated before the glowing heat, unconsciously forming a wild, weird picture there in that narrow, rock-bound pocket.

Higher leaped the flames, and brighter each minute grew the scene, until each bush and shrub, clinging so close y against those rocky slopes, seemed to stand forth in bold relief.

And yet no sign, no trace, of Gold Dust Dan could the keenest eye discern.

"Curses! He has slipped us!" growled the chief.

Even as the words escaped the desperado, the outlaw Benton flung up his hands and sank lifeless to the earth, while a sharp fusillade of revolver shots, commingled with a wild and thrilling war cry, rang out far up the rocky heights.

Then, in a ringing voice, came the words:

"It is war—war to the death, Captain Black!"

A chill seemed to strike the desperado group, and each man stood as if spell-bound.

Two hundred feet above, thrown into bold relief by that fiery glow, upon the very edge of a jutting spur, his handsome face as cold and white as that of an avenging angel, stood Gold Dust Dan.

Then, with the spring of a panther, the youth disappeared, while again rang forth that wild cry:

"War—war to the death!"

CHAPTER VIII.

JOB PEPPERBEAN.

The morning sun, rising above the caps of a group of three sharply defined hills a few miles to the south of Deadwood, looked down upon a strange scene.

There, in the narrow, heavily wooded valley, beside a swift, clear mountain stream, stood a number of wickiups, and back of them, in a sort of natural amphitheatre, was a temporary corral containing not less than a score of horses.

But the strange feature of the scene lay between the wickiups and the corral: a man bound, Mazeppa-like, upon the back of a horse.

The man was a short, bulky fellow, in appearance a common specimen of the mountain tramp.

"Whoa, Bones!" this Mazeppa yelled, in a husky voice. "Dern yer pieter, cain't ye see we're at ther fag end o' civilizashun? Stiddy, now, till I hail ther camp!"

Then, as the old gray horse came to a stop, forth rang the hail, in stentorian tones:

"Hallo! Hallo! Pile out, ye lazy critters! Help! Help! fer ther sufferin'! Hallo! Hallo! ther camp!"

Effective, too, was that bellowed jumble, for ere the last word had been uttered each of the wickiups gave up its occupants, while a sentry, reposing in a snug nook down in the corral, suddenly sprang into view, rifle in hand.

"Help! Help!" continued the Mazeppa, as if wholly unconscious of the effect produced.

"Stop that yawp!" sternly cried a tall, sinewy fellow, striding forward, knife in hand. "You'll have Captain Black and his devils down upon us."

"Aw—I beg yer pardon!" uttered the tortured tramp. "But I say, pardy, cut me loose, please, an' roll me down easy! I've had enough an' plenty ter spare o' bumps an' jolts this three hours!"

It was the work of but a moment to sever the stout thongs holding the Mazeppa in place, and as they parted he fell in a heap to the ground.

"Gi'me a lift, somebody. I'm sore as gumbles in June."

"Cut your nonsense!" sharply ordered the rescuer, catching the Mazeppa by the arm and jerking him to his feet. "Who and what are you? Tell the truth."

"Please, yer honor, I'm Job Pepperbean—poor an' honest, but jest now terrible down on me luck, an' that's no lie."

"But it is a lie just the same! See here, my man, fairy tales don't go! You are in Camp Ransome, and I am Durango Dan, chief of these fellows around us. We're Vigilantes, and we are out for the scalp of Captain Black. Now, do you know what that means?"

Vigorously slapping his ponderous thigh Job Pepperbean uttered a yell of delight.

"Putt et thar, Durango Dan—putt et thar!" he cried, extending a grimy hand to the self-styled Vigilante. "Shake, by mighty, fer ye've hit me right whar I live! I hates Captain Black wuss nar a pro'bishunst hates good red tangleleg!"

Thrusting his arms akimbo, Job Pepperbean slowly turned completely around, while his twinkling little eyes scanned each of the faces gathered about him.

"A nice lot you be, pards," the bulky vagrant continued. "Just ther kind I like, b'gum! An' ef some mother's son 'u'd only offer me a wee drop o' ther critter I'd feel right ter home among ye—I jest would, now, sure's my name's Job Pepperbean."

"Neither sup nor bite do you get till you've told a straight story," broke in Durango Dan, curtly.

"Please, yer honor, an' what is et ye want ter know?" Pepperbean asked, cringing before the fiery gaze of the Vigilante. "I know I'm a silly old fool when my tongue gits ter waggin'; but, jest p'int ther way, an' I'll sing ye a straight song—so help me grashus!"

"Who and what are you?" explosively. "And how came you here in such a way and at such a time? By Heavens! I'm inclined to believe you're a—"

"Wal, what, boss?" humbly ventured Pepperbean.

"Colossal fraud and liar, for one thing!" the Vigilante averred, smiling grimly, while his hands toyed with the lints of the heavy revolvers. "Speak out, man!"

"Job Pepperbean, by yer leave, sir, as I once done tole ye already. Once a prospector an' miner, now guardian an' purveyor-in-general to ther great hills mystery, Roving Rath."

"Aha! You—"

"Exactly, boss!" broke in Pepperbean, with an unctuous flourish. "An' lookin' arter ther affairs o' Lady Ruth last night, I was set upon by thet prince o' unhangd cut-throats, Cap'n Black, garroted, robbed, plundered, marauded, an' wellnigh murdered, sir; yas, sir; an' bound upon that thar hoss, a second Mazzeppa, an' set adrift in these hyar wilds, a helpless prey to bird an' beast, outlaw an' redrind. But providence tempers ther wind ter ther shorn lamb, sir, an' providence led ole Bones straight inter Camp Ransome, sir—straight to your bold an' noble self, sir! Oh! Ah! Could I but fall upon thy neck an' weep, my noble—um—ah!—preserver!"

A pronounced titter from the group of Vigilantes followed the snuffing of the vagrant, and Durango Dan turned red with rage.

"Upon the miserable cur, boys!" he shouted, himself springing forward. "Bind and gag him, for he's a spy for Captain Black!"

And in less than the time it takes to tell it, Job Pepperbean was again in bonds; but, ere a gag could be slipped between his jaws, a sharp warning cry from the sentry at the corral drew the attention of the Vigilantes.

Looking up, they beheld a singular looking cavalcade approaching.

CHAPTER IX.

ENTRAPPED.

Yes, strange indeed was this cavalcade. Nine riders in all, and slightly in advance of the main body, astride a great white stallion and leading a powerfully built clay-bank horse, rode the leader of the party—a woman!

Behind this mysterious personage, mounted on black horses and riding two abreast, came eight sable figures, each leading a pack horse.

For a full minute Durango Dan stood gazing at the approaching column like one fascinated; then from his lips leaped the words:

"By Heavens! it is Roving Ruth, the Black Hills mystery, and with her are her eight black bravos! Now, indeed, shall we test the truth of this fat cur's words!"

A wild howl of delight broke from Job Pepperbean, and, with what seemed scarcely an effort, he scrambled to his feet, bound though he was.

"Oh, et's me purty boss, dead sure!" he chuckled, weaving oddly to and fro. "Glory hallelujah! I'm—"

"Silence!" brusquely interrupted Durango Dan, his open hand falling across Pepperbean's mouth in a vigorous slap. "Another word unbidden, and you die!"

"Dustan—Maguire—Kelly! Forward there with your Winchesters, and halt Lady Ruth and her men, for enter this camp they shall not till we know their mission!"

Promptly the three men addressed sprang forward, and, as their deadly rifles came to a level, forth rang the stern challenge:

"Halt, Roving Ruth, and give an account of yourself! This is a Vigilante camp, and none enter without a permit!"

Drawing rein, the woman uttered a sarcastic laugh.

"Vigilantes or outlaws, it's all one to me!" she cried, with a vivid flash of her dark eyes. "My quest leads me onward, and onward I shall go!"

"Now, a word of warning: Release that man you hold prisoner! He is my servant, and belongs to my party. Do you hear?"

"I hear, madam," Durango Dan replied, briskly stepping forward, revolvers in hand; "but while I dislike to delay you, there is a mystery about the fellow that must be cleared up.

"He came into our camp a few minutes since, bound upon the back of a horse, and claimed to have been held up and robbed by Captain Black, the road agent, who then sent him adrift in the fix in which he appeared here.

"Now, madam, prove the truth of his story, and he goes free. Fail to do so, and he shall be tried and hanged, for I am firmly convinced that he is one of Captain Black's spies."

Again that sarcastic laugh from Roving Ruth, and Durango Dan sharply recoiled a pace, as she flung her shapely right hand aloft.

"With the truth or falsity of Job Pepperbean's story I have nothing whatever to do," she declared, coldly. "Let it suffice that I have told the truth, and that, should it later be proved that he is a spy for Captain Black, I hold myself responsible for his deliverance into the hands of the authorities. Now, release him!"

A dark look crossed the face of the Vigilante chief, and, in a low voice, without a movement of his lips, he uttered the words:

"Ready, boys, for it looks like war!"

Then aloud: "As chief of the Vigilantes I refuse to yield him, Roving Ruth!"

"Then upon your head be the result!" was the swiftly uttered response. "Forward, men, and show no quarter! You are striking outlaws, not Vigilantes, for these men are a part of Captain Black's band!"

A hoarse cheer burst from the eight black bravos, and, to a man, they prepared to charge.

Again Durango Dan stepped forward, and with uplifted hand requested silence and a truce.

"At the first forward move upon the part of yourself or your men, Roving Ruth, Job Pepperbean dies!" he exclaimed, grimly. "Know that, then come on, if you will!"

"On!" shouted the mysterious woman, heedless of that grim warning. "On, and cut down every miscreant who resists!"

That a conflict must come was now apparent, and, with an execration Durango Dan sprang back.

At the same moment a firm hand gripped his shoulder, while the cold muzzle of a revolver was thrust against his temple.

"Steady, captain!" uttered a low, stern voice. "As chief of Ransome's Vigilantes I order you to yield that prisoner! Men, throw up your hands! Your captive goes free! Resist, and you shall settle at headquarters!"

Had a thunderbolt fallen in their midst the surprise and consternation of the Vigilantes could not have been more pronounced.

The speaker was a slender youth verging closely upon man's estate. There was that in his well-knit, sinewy figure, in his dark, piercing eyes and stern, unfaltering face which betokened an unyielding will and dauntless courage.

How or from what quarter he had come, no one of the Vigilantes could say; had he literally dropped from the clouds, his appearance there could not have been more unexpected, more sudden, or more startling.

Roving Ruth seemed at a glance to read the altered situation aright, and a hurried command checked the advance of her followers.

For a full minute Durango Dan stood like one turned to stone; then his madly gleaming eyes slowly shifted till they met the stern and chilling gaze of his captor.

"Your authority for this step—I demand to see it!" he grated, through his hard-set teeth.

"A truce, and your wish is granted," was the cool response.

"A truce be it."

Releasing the Vigilante's shoulder, the youth drew a folded paper from an inner pocket, saying:

"My authority is there."

Eagerly unfolding the sheet, Durango Dan read:

"Durango Dan—The bearer, Dandy Bill, of Denver, is hereby put in command of our men in wait for Gold Dust Dan.

"Report to me immediately, as there is quick, hot work ahead.

"RANSOME,
"Deadwood."

A long sigh of relief fluttered from the Vigilante's lips when his eyes had finished the boldly written scrawl, and he promptly extended his hand.

"I pass, Dandy Bill, and I welcome you to Camp Ransome. Pard, your new chief, Dandy Bill! Treat him right, and you'll never be sorry!"

A wild cheer burst from the throats of the reckless crew, and as they crowded forward to greet their new leader, Durango Dan severed the bonds holding Job Pepperbean.

"Git!" he exclaimed, then turned sharply as the ringing hoof-strokes of a horse sounded not a hundred yards away.

"Aha! who comes there?" he continued, his face paling, a lurid glow leaping into his dark orbs, while his hands dropped mechanically to the revolvers belted to his middle. "By Heavens, it is Reckless Roy!"

"Right you are, Buckskin!" was Dandy Bill's cool response, as he promptly covered the surprised Vigilante. "'Tis Reckless Roy, and I am Gold Dust Dan!"

"Hands up, all, or die! The camp is surrounded—you are prisoners!"

CHAPTER X.

A MESSAGE FROM THE MISSING.

A moment of profound silence followed that startling denouement, and then, with an imprecation, Durango Dan unbuckled and cast aside his belt of arms, saying:

"Pards, we must pass this deal, fer thar's a cold deck ag'in us, an' Gold Dust Dan an' his crowd hold all trumps!"

"Now be meek as lambs, fer these galoots be dead shots an' death to road agents. Savey?"

An assenting growl came from the Vigilantes, and one and all promptly followed the example of their leader, laying down their weapons and raising their empty hands.

"Ah, Buckskin, you are sensible to the last," grimly remarked Gold Dust Dan, as he deftly handcuffed the outlaw. "Were Captain Black himself in your shoes, he could hardly do it better."

"Captain Black be hanged, deuce grill him!" was the savage response, as Gold Dust Dan firmly drew his captive aside. "Stack yer chips mountain high as how he's safe, blast him!"

"Be not so sure, gentle Buckskin. Methinks the days of Captain Black are numbered. We go to Deadwood, you and I, and with your help I expect to net the captain."

"With my help!" exclaimed the captive, in evident surprise.

"So I said."

"A queer bit o' work fer me, it seems. Can't you explain?"

"In due time, my dear Buckskin," laughed Gold Dust Dan, as he calmly proceeded to bind his captive to a tree. "Think it all out as best you may. You'll stretch hemp or not, just as you elect."

With which significant remark Gold Dust Dan strode back among the Regulators, his keen gray eyes sharply alert for the bulky form of Job Pepperbean.

The hills tramp was not hard to find.

Indeed, he was a central figure in that bustling scene, his arms akimbo, his wheezy voice lifted in voluminous thanks for his timely deliverance from the Vigilantes.

A touch upon his shoulder, and he turned to meet Gold Dust Dan face to face.

"Lady Ruth awaits you," uttered the detective, in a peculiar tone, his piercing eyes looking straight into the round blue orbs of the vagrant.

"Ther hint's good es a kick, boss!" was the chuckling response. "Only—shake!"

The hands of the two men crossed, and then, in a guarded voice, Pepperbean continued:

"See Roy, Dan, an' bring him over ter Lady Ruth's outfit. Things aire movin' our way now, an' we'll have a good thing if we jest push it along."

"At once. But last night, Bolly—how did you escape?"

"Sh! Thet by an' by, youngster. Let be thet Bolly's dead. Savey?"

Dan nodded and turned away, while the vagrant bustled noisily toward Roving Ruth and her bravos.

Under the skilled hands of the Regulators the prisoners were speedily secured beyond escape, and then Reckless Roy turned aside with Gold Dust Dan.

"You were in the nick of time, Roy. Had you dropped from the clouds, your appearance could not have been more unexpected."

"'Tis an ill wind that blows nobody good, and it was trouble that brought me here."

"Trouble—"

"Media Bradlow has been stolen!"

"When?" he asked, sententiously.

"The night you left Gold Gulch."

"The trail—the signs! What said they?"

"Next to nothing. The alarm was immediately spread through the camp, and then it came out that some of the hangers-on at Dutch Jake's all-night resort had seen two strangers come to town shortly after midnight, and an examination disclosed the fact that there had been two or more horses hitched to the rear of the Mint some hours during the night.

"Beyond that the closest search and the keenest inquiry could discover nothing, and I at once divided the Regulators into squads to beat up the trails leading out of camp."

"There were hoof tracks in abundance going and coming, but no sign of the miscreants was visible, and at nightfall we halted and went into camp, where, shortly after midnight, we were joined by Old Calamity.

"The old ranger brought news. Soon after parting from you he had encountered three men with a captive, whom he believed to be a woman. He had followed them in the darkness, but had lost the trail in the vicinity of the cabin of a dwarf, known as General Grim."

"General Grim! I have heard of him. But—proceed, Roy."

"Well, as our horses had had a good breathing spell, we at once mounted and followed Old Calamity to the point at which he had lost his game. There we halted and vainly tried to pick up the trail by means of torches.

"After talking the matter over we decided to push on to Deadwood to secure your help, while he remained on the ground to make an attempt to pick up the lost trail by day."

"And he will find it, if it is to be found, but do you know, Roy, it is my belief there is a large sized plot afoot for gold and revenge? I have ascertained that my call to Deadwood was a skillfully baited trap, while, swift upon its heels, comes the abduction of Media Bradlow."

"But by whom, Dan? I understand about Media's inheritance, but Captain Black could have learned nothing from the lawyer's papers until many hours after her abduction."

"By survivors of Red Panther's band," was the prompt reply. "I will lay you my horse against your hat that Captain Black proves to be one of that merciless clan; and, if so, is it not possible that he is fully informed as to the Bradlow property?"

"To my mind it is now a fact that John Bradlow, the unfortunate young miner to whom Roving Ruth was betrothed, yet lives, and that he and Media are captives, held for ransom! The story of the bottle and the telltale paper is no hoax. The Bradlows' inheritance is to be the price of the Bradlows' liberty."

"You have said the simple truth, Gold Dust Dan!" interposed a musical voice, and Roving Ruth stepped forward.

"He whom I have mourned as dead yet lives, and it is my mission to find him."

"See here!" and the mysterious lady of the hills held aloft a small, flat bottle, in which was plainly visible a closely folded sheet of white paper. "This is a message from John Bradlow, found but a few days ago by one of my men. It bears date of September 15, and so was written less than three weeks ago."

"May I ask where it was found, Lady Ruth?" inquired Gold Dust Dan.

"In a small stream near the cabin home of the dwarf hunchback, General Grim."

"Ah, the general again!" Dan exclaimed, his dark eyes kindling, as he extended his hand to take the paper which Roving Ruth had deftly abstracted from the bottle. "Roy, we shall certainly have to make the acquaintance of that gentleman," and then, unfolding the bit of paper, Gold Dust Dan read aloud from the penciled scrawl:

"To whomsoever this may find its way:

"I, John Bradlow, a gold hunter, am held in captivity in a secret cavern of the Black Hills by the outlaw band of Jacob Rose, better known as Red Panther, for the purpose of extorting from me the secret of the location of a large amount of gold which they suspect I have buried.

"I will give five thousand dollars in gold to the person who, finding this, effects my release, directly or indirectly.

"The cave in which I am held is somewhere to the south of Deadwood, and is in a cliff overhanging the small stream to which I entrust this message. My wants are attended to by a remarkable looking dwarf, who styles himself the General.

"This is all I know, and upon this slender clue you must work. Give heed to this appeal of a helpless prisoner, and may the blessings of Heaven be upon you."

"JOHN BRADLOW."

"Sept. 15, 18—"

CHAPTER XI.

OLD CALAMITY'S RUSE.

For a full minute no one broke the silence which followed the reading of this remarkable message. Then Gold Dust Dan corefully refolded the paper and handed it back to Roving Ruth, saying:

"It seems that this 'General' is fast becoming the central figure in a series of startling mysteries, and I shall not be at all surprised if, in the end, we find him the moving spirit of Captain Black's band.

"The matter will bear further investigation. General Grim is reported as a cunning knave, and I shall put his cunning to the test.

"Lady Ruth, with your permission I'll leave the jail-birds in the care of your bravos for a day or so, for I shall start within the hour."

The beautiful mystery mutely inclined her head, and there the conference ended.

"Wal, ye see, Dan'l, it war like this; I never made a den in my life thet I didn't leave a back way out so ef things got too pressin' in front I c'u'd walk off an' leave matters ter cool down. An' thet's how I escaped last night. I war on'y stunned a bit by ther bullet thet varlet let fly at me; an' es soon es I kem to an' they gave me a hafeway chaine, w'y I jest sneaked.

"But you, Dan'l—how did you sarcumvent ther enemy? I seed you do ther defy act a-top ther bluff, but war too far off ter make my presence known."

"Climbed the chimney, Bolly, and from the cabin roof got a foothold on the bluff," Gold Dust Dan explained. "In wandering about, I struck Roving Ruth's outfit, just before day, and there learned that you had escaped and were then on your way to Camp Ransome in the guise of Job Pepperbean.

"A short talk with Roving Ruth convinced me that my suspicions of Austin Ransome were well founded, and that the Vigilantes in waiting for me were outlaws—probably members of Captain Black's band, and we at once determined to capture them. Disguised, and with that forged note from Ransome, I entered the camp. The result, you know."

"It all worked jest right, Dan'l, an' I reckon we'd better play pards to ther end o' this game. While you go with Roy ter get a peep et ther hunchback, I'll jest mog along ter Deadwood an' keep an eye on Austin Ransome. What say?"

"It suits me exactly," declared Dan, extending his hand.

"Mud cats an' houn' pups! Sech a cantankerous wrinkle I never did see! Two up, two down—an' no tellin' which couple is hafe girl!"

With that muttered expression of disgust, Old Calamity quickly retreated from the brink of the stream, crossing the narrow strip of stony waste, and disappearing in the dense undergrowth choking the forest border.

And snugly ensconcing himself in the shelter of a thicket Old Calamity buried his face in his hands and silently meditated.

Fifteen minutes slipped by and the ranger moved not. Then, suddenly, as if produced by the direct application of electricity, a slight tremor shook his wasted form, and one hand clenched at his breast with a convulsive movement.

"Death an' destruction!" he murmured softly, a faint sigh escaping his tremulous old lips, his eyes turning back in their shrunken sockets. "Red-rinds, outlaws, varlets o' ev'ry description—an' thar's trouble brewin' this blessed minute—shore!"

The mournful reflections ceased, and a steely glitter appeared in his dull blue eyes.

Suspicion had become certainty. The trap so skillfully set was ready for springing.

Out of the undergrowth across the glade glided a man, a tall, black-bearded, muscular looking fellow, grasping a Winchester rifle ready for use.

For a full minute he stood silent and motionless, sharply eyeing the wretched looking cayuse; then he swept the glade with his keen black eyes.

"Et's derved strange wot's become o' ther ole cuss," he muttered, in an under-

tone just audible to the hidden ranger. "Thar's his critter, shore enuff, but whar's he?"

As if in answer to that suspicious query, there arose, at that moment, a low, quavering sound, rising and falling with a peculiar inflection which left no doubt as to its origin or meaning:

"Asleep, by thunder! An' snorin' like a nigger with his heels to the fire!" the desperado exclaimed, with a chuckle.

"Hey, thar! Wake up!" he yelled, with a grin of malicious delight, as he gave the ranger a vicious poke in the ribs with the muzzle of the rifle. "Change ky-ars fer Limbo!"

Old Calamity did "wake up." With a swift fling of his arm, he dashed the rifle aside, and with the nimbleness of a cat sprang full upon the outlaw, throwing him off his feet.

"Hands up!" he grated, levelling a cocked revolver with marvelous quickness.

"Don't, pardner! I was on'y jokin'!"

"Jokin', eh?" grinned Old Calamity, as he kicked the fallen rifle aside.

"Thet was it. Comin' by, I see you asleep thar, an' thort I'd jest give ye a scare. Call et square, now, an' we'll take a drink."

"Cain't see et, bub! Fact is, I see you a bit ago, down by the crick, an' I jest let drop a few words ter draw you on. Thar's on'y one chaince fer you. You must tell the truth, or die!"

"Whar is Media Bradlow?"

"Who—what?" he stammered, with an uneasy shifting of his gaze. "Say et ag'in, pardner, fer I don't—don't jest on—derstand."

"Whar is Media Bradlow? Don't lie! Straight-out truth, now, or—"

"Which same I'll give ye, pardner! Ye're on ther wrong track—that's so, fer I never heerd o' him or her till you spoke the name!"

"Don't lie! I warn ye, again! Ther name ye may not know, but ther critter ye do know! Whar is she?"

"Fer a gospel fac'. I don't know."

"Ye do know! You an' your ilk stole her out o' Gold Gulch; you helped putt her away, an' you're goin' to tell—mark thet!"

"Now, git up!"

Sullenly the outlaw obeyed, and Old Calamity disarmed and bound him.

"Now, pint yer nose toward thet bit o' tall timmer over yen, an' keep yer mouth shet, or off goes yer head."

"It's no use!" exclaimed the outlaw, defiantly. "I won't talk—I won't tell! Kill me here, for my secret dies with me!"

CHAPTER XII.

THE "GENERAL" TURNS A TRICK.

"Listen to reason, General Grim. For-sake your desperate companion and release us. I will make you a rich man."

Gravely the hunchback inclined himself, his ugly face as expressionless as that of a sphinx, yet with a peculiar light lurking in the depths of his dusky eyes.

"Fair lady, you ask that which is impossible, save under the sole condition which I have named," he returned, deliberately. "It is only upon your solemn promise to become my wife—"

"Silence, you devil!" harshly interrupted a third voice, while out of the denser gloom of the rear of the cavern advanced a pale, emaciated man, heavily weighted with chains. "Better that we both rot here than that such an unholy compact be made. Your wife. Faugh!"

"As you will, John Bradlow!" snarled the hunchback, recoiling with a hideous distortion of his face. "You have said it! I bid you and your charming sister adieu!"

A profound inclination, a burst of elfish

laughter, and General Grim disappeared amid the shadows of the cavern.

"Thank Heaven! the fiend has gone!" Bradlow exclaimed, sinking to the solid stone floor.

"Now, Media, let us see if you can find a weak point in these chains. We must find one, for it is our last hope."

Eagerly Media Bradlow bent to the task, her bright blue eyes narrowly scanning each link in that dim, uncertain light—slowly, one by one, to end in failure!

"It is as I feared!" Bradlow grimly exclaimed, when the faltering tones of the girl announced the result. "The scoundrels made sure work of it, and I am sorely afraid we are doomed unless—"

"Unless what, Jack?"

"Unless your friends in Gold Gulch succeed in finding and running down the trail of your captors, Media."

"They will, Jack," the girl asserted, while a faint flush crept into her pallid face. "Roy will never rest until he finds me."

Bradlow shook his head.

"It is a slender chance," he declared. "Do not hope for too much, my sister. These outlaws are cunning knaves, and doubtless covered well their trail. Then, too, this is a forsaken locality, most difficult to approach, and the cavern is well hidden."

"In all the months I have been here I have seen but two men other than the hunchback and the captain, though I have stationed myself day after day either at the crevice overlooking the stream below or at the one on the opposite side of the cavern. To both of these men I shouted until my voice failed me, yet not a sound seemed to reach them."

"No, no, Media! Let us not hope too much, for the disappointment may be bitter. Three times have I thrown a message into the stream, and each time my heart beat high with the hope that some prospector might find it and effect my deliverance. Yet it was all in vain."

"I hoped, too, to bribe that hunchback devil into turning me loose, only to be flogged for my pains. The last time I tempted him, and we had reached the cabin ere he changed his mind. Ah, God! I'll never forget that night!"

A shudder convulsed the crouching form, and Media gently drew her brother to his feet.

"Come, Jack, let us look out of the crevices," she suggested, anxiously. "It can do us no harm, and we may see—who knows what we may see?"

Bradlow silently led the way. It was an old story to him, looking out the crevices, hoping against hope; yet, for his sister's sake, he did not demur.

Just at the length of the chain holding him to the rocky wall was the first crevice, extending from the floor up into the dome of the cavern—a narrow, zigzag rift, admitting nearly all of light and air there was in that gloomy den.

Listlessly the brother, eagerly the sister, they peered out. The sun, as nearly as could be judged, was approaching zenith, and a swift-flowing stream a few hundred feet away shone with a silvery luster. Beyond it lay the frost-tinted foliage of thicket and wood, and there, securely hidden from view of the cabin below, and anxiously scanning the face of the bluff, were a number of horsemen!

"It is Roy! it is Roy!" Media exclaimed in joyous excitement. "Quick, Jack; lift me up on this bench in the wall! The crevice is wider above, and I can signal him!"

Strengthened by hope, the cavern captive hastily lifted the girl upon the narrow elevation, and, in a moment, her hand and arm were thrust through the crevice, frantically waving a small white handkerchief.

"He sees! he answers!" shouted Bradlow, in a delirium of joy, as he noted an answering signal from the leader of the horsemen. "We are saved!"

But at that moment a rifle cracked somewhere below, and Reckless Roy toppled out of his saddle and fell heavily upon the ground.

Let us now follow General Grim, the hunchback.

With a face purpled with rage, he turned from his captives, and as he strode across the cavern a succession of violent ejaculations and threats burst from his writhing lips.

"Deuce grill him! the half-dead worm!" he snarled. "Blast an' double blast him! I'll skin him alive an' marry the jade to boot! I say it! I'll do it! An' when General Grim promises, the deed's as good as done!"

Thus muttering, the dwarf approached a roughly constructed door, which swung open at his touch, revealing a flight of stone steps leading down into the darkness.

Closing and securely fastening this door, he took a lantern from a niche in the wall, lighted it, and strode downward, the long saber clanking dismally at his side. At the bottom was another door, which he likewise closed and fastened after him.

The dwarf was now in a cavern similar to the one above, but considerably larger, and evidently used as a general rendezvous.

"Ye're jest in ther nick o' time, gineral," exclaimed a burly ruffian, advancing from the side of the cave. "A gang from Gold Gulch aire hot on ther trail, an' in jest two minutes ye'll hev 'em hammerin' at ther cabin door, or I misses my guess."

"Let 'em hammer—I'll receive them!" was the vicious response. "Keep an eye on things on the outside, Landlord, an' if the galoots get too brash, wake up the boys."

Landlord nodded curtly and returned to his position beside a small opening in the side of the cavern, while the hunchback hurried in the opposite direction.

Quitting the cave by means of yet another rudely fashioned door, General Grim entered a dark and narrow corridor, through which he made his way to a position just in the rear of the cabin.

Here he stooped and applied his eye to a small hole which had been drilled through the solid rock.

The interior of the cabin met his gaze, and after a brief scrutiny he pushed a small lever and forced the stone aside.

Through the aperture thus created he crept; the stone slab slipped back into place, and the general was "at home."

With noiseless celerity he removed the bolts and bars holding the cabin door; then, with naked sword in hand, he placed himself facing a large map of the world which hung upon the wall.

One—two minutes passed, and the dwarf stood motionless, save for the slight turning of his wrist as the point of his blade traced a slow zigzag across the face of the map. Then a sharp rap sounded at the door, and he turned his head to utter the one word:

"Enter!"

Even as his lips formed that curt invitation, the door was flung open, revealing a lithe, athletic figure on the threshold.

"London—Paris—Berlin!" uttered the dwarf, in a dull monotone, without so much as a second glance at his unwelcome visitor. "Three important strategic points to be carefully guarded. Let me see: The Fifth corps for London, the Twenty-first for Paris, and the Fifty-ninth for Berlin. Yes: that will do it."

"Begging your pardon, is this General Grim I address?" blandly inquired the

youth, in the doorway, as that dull monotone ceased for a breath.

The hunchback faced about.

"I am General Grim," he replied, with a stiff salute. "And you?"

"Daniel Deerfoot, general, and in search of information."

"Very good, Mr. Deerfoot; very good, sir. Will you have the kindness to state exactly what you want? My time is—valuable."

"I perceive there is a campaign of unusual moment afoot," Gold Dust Dan grimly returned. "The fact is, general, your campaigns are becoming too frequent, and it is about the result of your latest one that I wish to inquire."

"What have you done with Media Bradlow?"

The dwarf's face instantly assumed a look of intense surprise.

"Media Bradlow!" he ejaculated. "That name is strange to me. May I inquire who the young lady is?"

"She is the sister of John Bradlow, the man you have held captive so long," was the cool response.

That look of surprise simply deepened.

"You speak in riddles," exclaimed the general, after a moment of reflection. "Pray reduce your inquiries to matters of fact and common-sense, or I shall have to decline to listen."

Gold Dust Dan entered the cabin and closed the door.

"You will listen, general, and you will answer, too," he declared, sternly. "And, between man and man, I advise you to confess and have done with the whole villainous scheme. I have positive evidence that you are allied to the band of the notorious Captain Black; that you hold John Bradlow captive, and that you are a party to the abduction of his sister, Media Bradlow."

"In a word, general, as the case now stands, your neck isn't worth the rope it will take to break it."

The hunchback shivered, and a look of fear came over his hideous face.

"I see! I see!" he exclaimed, hastily sheathing his sword. "My good Mr. Deerfoot, I am so glad that you came! These matters have been pressing heavily upon me, but I have been so unhappily situated that I dared not make known the truth."

"Now I see my way clear, for I can rely upon your protection."

"I am, indeed, an ally of Captain Black—not from choice, but under duress, and I am the jailor of both John Bradlow and his sister."

"I tell you this frankly and freely, and rely upon you to take me away from here with you, that I may escape the fury of Captain Black when he finds that I have betrayed him."

"Now follow me."

Turning to the huge fireplace at the rear of the cabin, the general inserted a short bar of iron in a crevice in the rear wall, and with a wrench of his long and powerful arm forced the huge slab of stone aside.

"It is balanced upon rollers, and moves back and forth, as you see," he explained, stepping back a pace.

"That, my good Mr. Deerfoot, is the entrance to Captain Black's prison. The captives are within, as you may discover if you care to take a glance within."

Mechanically Gold Dust Dan stooped and peered through the gloomy aperture.

At that instant a single rifle shot sounded near at hand.

Uttering an elfish screech, General Grim swung the short, heavy bar of iron high aloft, and brought it down with crushing force upon the head of Gold Dust Dan.

CHAPTER XIII.

OLD CALAMITY'S DARING GAME.

"Kill me here, for my secret dies with me!"

The words burst fiercely, viciously from the lips of the captive outlaw; yet the trained ears of Old Calamity detected a despairing strain in the subdued voice, and a mocking laugh came from his grizzled lips.

"Mud cats an' houn' pups! But ye're a queer ki-oodle!" he exclaimed. "Kill you? Not fer Susanna, dear! Man, ye're a walkin' mine o' information! Ye kin shed whole bushels o' light on these calamitous leetle misfortunes we're all so muxed up in, an' ye're gwine ter do et, too!"

"Now—mosey!"

A slight jab with the point of his bowie emphasized the ranger's command, and the outlaw started rapidly across the glade.

Keenly alert, Old Calamity kept close at the heels of his victim until they had gained the shelter of the dense woodland, when he ordered a halt.

"Now, we're out o' sight o' yer gang, an' we kin git right down ter business 'thout fear o' interruption," he explained, grimly facing his captive. "Jest git yer talkin' tackle onlumbered, fer I'm a com-in'."

The outlaw grimly shook his head.

"This is a useless waste o' time," he declared. "I know but little, an' that little I won't tell."

Old Calamity uttered a weary sigh.

"I hate ter do et, but et's a case o' have to, I guess," he muttered, and forcing the outlaw back he fastened him securely to a tree. "Et's an Injun trick, an' I hate like smoke ter use et, but when needs must ther devil drives, they say, an' so here goes."

Collecting a quantity of dry twigs and fallen limbs, the old mountain patrol kindled a small fire, across which he laid the fallen limbs.

The outlaw looked on with curious eyes, and his face gradually assumed an ashen tint.

He understood the meaning of that hurried preparation. He was to be tortured with fire.

It was a dire thought, and as it burst upon him in all its horror, his nerve failed him completely.

"I say, pardner, let's patch this hyer thing up some way," he hastily urged.

"I ain't patchin' just now," returned Old Calamity, grimly.

"Kinder bin thinkin' I was in ther wrong about thet little matter," the outlaw continued, desperately. "I've made up my mind to tell."

"A parsel o' lies, I reckon!"

"No, no! Ther truth!"

The ranger calmly added a few sticks to his fire.

"What's yer name?" he asked.

"Gabe Pyatt, I'm called now."

"B'long ter Cap'n Black's band?"

"Ya-as, I do; j'ined less'n two weeks ago."

"An' ye war in this hyar raid arter ther gal?"

"I war."

"Very good, so far, Gabe Pyatt, but be keerful, now, or ye'll strike a calamitous misfortune."

"Whar's ther gal?"

"I don't know."

Picking up one of the brands which had burned in two, Old Calamity stepped toward Pyatt.

"I really don't know!" asseverated that wretch, cowering against the tree. "She's at headquarters, but I'm a new man an' hev never bin thar yit."

"Uh, huh! Thet's a likely story—thet is! Ain't ye got an idea?"

"Yas, yas! There's a cave somewhar in ther bluff back o' ther hunchback's cabin, an' she's thar, 'long with her brother."

"Go down stream about a mile, an' ye'll strike a branch runnin' in from ther nor'west through a canyon. Turn up this canyon, an' ye can git upon ther bluff an' look fer yerself."

Old Calamity started.

"Ther bluff, then, is not a part o' ther main hill?" he queried.

"No; on'y a narrer ridge. Ther main hill is t'other side o' ther canyon. F'm this side they look ter be all one, but they ain't."

"How many men aire in ther cavern?"

"I don't know. Four or five, maybe."

"All right, Gabe Pyatt. I reckon I kin find out by an' by, fer I'll go now."

"An' me?"

"You'll stay hyar till I git back."

The outlaw demurred, but Calamity was determined. Stamping out the fire, he fashioned a rude gag for the mouth of the captive, looked to the security of his bonds, and departed.

A walk of a few minutes took the old patrol back to the glade where the cayuse was browsing, and a moment later he was in the saddle, riding toward the stream.

Striking the water a considerable distance below the hunchback's cabin, Calamity turned down stream and rode slowly on till he came to the branch Pyatt had mentioned.

"So far, so good," he muttered, laying his course up the canyon. "Wouldn't wonder a bit ef thet fire dodge didn't scare Pyatt inter tellin' ther straight truth, but I'll keep an eye open fer traps, jest ther same."

But there were no "traps." Pyatt, thoroughly cowed by the ferocious aspect of the old ranger, had told the exact truth so far as he knew it.

A very few minutes sufficed to find a break in the canyon wall whence an easy ascent of the ridge was possible, and with a word of caution to Pepper, Old Calamity took his lariat from his saddle horn and started upward.

On gaining the crest the ranger made a careful survey of his surroundings. The ridge was narrow, and of varying height, while the top, nearly flat, sloped slightly toward the canyon, and was covered in places with small clumps of dwarfed trees.

The cabin of the hunchback could be seen at the foot of the eastern bluff, and without further loss of time Old Calamity advanced and took up a position directly above it.

The sun was scarcely more than an hour above the eastern horizon, and the ranger snugly settled himself in the undergrowth at the verge of the bluff, to watch the cabin and await developments.

His patience was soon rewarded.

A man—a supple, well-built fellow, dressed like a miner and heavily armed, emerged from the cabin, crossed the stretch of stony waste and turned up stream.

"Out to relieve Pyatt!" chuckled the watcher. "But Pyatt's gone, an' now thar'll be a circus."

This surmise proved correct, for in a few minutes the fellow came running back and darted into the cabin, to reappear, a moment later, accompanied by General Grim and another member of the band.

The hunchback was speaking, and his harsh voice was distinctly audible to the lurking spy.

"In any event," the general was saying, his sword flashing brightly as he waved it to and fro, "in any event, Pyatt has disobeyed orders. No man stationed at headquarters is permitted to cross that stream without express orders to do so."

"You, Talcott, take the post he has abandoned."

"Nadross, the men agree that you are the best trailer in the band. Follow the traitor and bring him back, dead or alive, but alive if possible. Away!"

Both men darted rapidly across the barren, while the hunchback turned and re-entered the cabin.

"Mud cats an' houn' pups! Ef pard Nadross listens ter pard Pyatt, I'm likely ter hev comp'ny come in ther back door!" muttered Old Calamity, running his fingers through his long, chin hair. "'Pears if I'd better conclude my observations an' take a ramble."

"Now, that cabin seems ter be ther hive, an' I do opine ther gal is thar, or tharabouts. Howsomever, I'll poke about a bit."

Drawing back from the verge, the old patrol sprang up and began an extended examination of the ridge. Numerous seams and crevices existed, but no other evidence of the existence of a cavern could be found.

"I'll hev ter try ther cabin," he exclaimed, giving up the search after something more than an hour. "Thet's headquarters."

Returning to the shelter of the timber, he resumed his position overlooking the cabin, and calmly waited.

"Ef thet cuss hes found Pyatt, he'd ought ter be back soon now, ef he don't disobey orders, too, an' foller me," he muttered, noting the position of the sun. "Cain't take ther risk till I know--thet's sure!"

His doubts were speedily set at rest, for Nadross soon reappeared, half leading, half dragging Pyatt, gagged and with his arms pinioned at his back.

Captor and captive were met at the door by the hunchback, and all three entered the cabin. Ten minutes passed, and then Nadross reappeared and again started across the barren in a run.

"Et's now or never!" muttered the old ranger, when the outlaw had disappeared among the bushes bordering the stream. "Pard Nadross has gone to run down my trail, an' when he gets here he must find me gone."

Uncoiling his lariat, Calamity passed it around a small tree near the brink, then dropped both ends over the bluff. As he had foreseen, both reached the cabin roof.

With his rifle slung at his back, he slipped over the verge and rapidly descended. Listening a moment to assure himself that he had not alarmed the occupants of the cabin, he drew down and coiled the lariat, then sank down with his ear to the roof.

Not a sound came from within.

The roof was formed of roughly hewn slabs, which were held in place by the weight of heavy cross-timbers pinned to the top log of each end wall.

"Cain't go through thar!" Old Calamity muttered, after trying for some minutes to slip one of the thinner slabs aside. "But I believe ther shack's deserted, an' I'll try ther chimney."

The chimney was a rude affair, built of sticks, stone and clay, with the face of the bluff forming one side, and amply large to admit a far larger man than the ranger.

A brief examination disclosed this fact, and, further, that it had been sel-

dom used, the sides showing but little trace of smoke or soot.

Peering down, Calamity listened intently for several minutes, but not a sound came from below. Securing his lariat to his belt, and looking to the condition of his revolvers, the ranger then drew himself up, silently entered the top of the chimney, and began the descent.

Noiselessly, pausing at intervals to listen, he descended until his feet rested upon the stone hearth, when he stooped and leaped lightly out into the room, a revolver in each hand.

But the cabin was deserted. The door was securely fastened on the inside, and the one window was closed.

Mystified, the old mountain tramp gazed searchingly at the walls and the floor.

No means of going in or out were visible, save the door and the window.

A ladder in one corner led to a loft overhead, and without a moment's hesitation the ranger ascended.

This loft was not over three feet in height, but was provided with a number of loopholes, which admitted sufficient light partially to dispel the gloom.

A bear skin lay in one corner, but beyond this it was absolutely bare.

Drawing the bearskin out into the middle of the floor, Old Calamity stretched himself out at full length upon it, face downward, with his eyes near a crevice which commanded a full view of the cabin below.

Patiently the ranger waited, resolved to ferret out the mystery of the cabin. The minutes dragged slowly by. The bearskin was a couch soft and luxurious to the tired frame of the old borderman, and more than once he caught himself napping.

Then tired nature asserted herself, and he slept—quietly, peacefully, careless of the danger of his position.

The sound of voices below awoke him: with a startled air he lifted his head and listened, then bent his eyes to the crevice.

"Gold Dust Dan, by all thet's dead an' livin'!" was the thought that went whirling through his brain; then his keen old eyes drank in the scene below.

"Dan'l! Dan'l! Ye're in 'ther hornets' nest!" he muttered, as he noted the general's words. "Thet hunchback devil is plottin' ter sting ye!"

Rising to his hands and knees, the ranger crept softly toward the ladder and swung himself silently downward, revolver in hand.

At that moment that mysterious rifle shot rang out, followed by that clish screech from General Grim, and with a savage cry Old Calamity flung his hand to a level and fired!

Just in time was that furious snapshot; for with his right arm broken at the wrist, the hunchback's blow glanced harmlessly from the head of Gold Dust Dan, and with the wild, fierce cry of a wounded beast, the outlaw darted head first through the yawning aperture into the cavern.

Staggering to his feet, weapons in hand, Gold Dust Dan faced Old Calamity.

CHAPTER XIV.

BAFFLED.

Recognition instantly flashed from the dark eyes of the young man, and he extended his hand.

"In the nick o' time, Calamity!" he exclaimed, as he quickly drew the ranger aside from the cavern opening. "General Grim threw me completely off my guard for a moment, and but for your shot that

bar of iron would have settled the case for me."

"An' yer head, how is it?" queried the ranger, anxiously, as he noted the pallor of the young detective's face. "Et war a measly mean lick, Dan'l."

"Yes; I saw all the heavenly constellations in a bunch, Calamity. But my hat saved my scalp, and I've nothing to show for the blow, but a good, big lump, while we've certainly got the varmints holed at last."

"Ef they don't slip out the back way an' track fer a new den," the ranger suggested. "Et's a cinch thar's another way out, Dan'l."

To this the detective agreed, and after a few words of mutual explanations he left Old Calamity on guard and hurried out of the cabin to summon Reckless Roy and the Regulators.

Although ignorant of the source of that muffled report which had sounded at the moment of his encounter with General Grim, the detective suspected that the shot had been fired by an outlaw sentry posted in some niche in the face of the bluff, and accordingly kept closely under cover of the projecting rocks as he sped along to a point whence he could summon his friends.

At a point perhaps a hundred yards distant from the cabin, he halted in an abrupt angle of the rocky wall and uttered a series of short, sharp whistles.

Instantly there came an answering note from the undergrowth bordering the creek, and, a moment later, a number of horsemen dashed rapidly across the open, while half a dozen rifle shots rang harmlessly out from the face of the bluff above.

At the head of the band rode Reckless Roy, his head freshly bandaged, but sitting erect in his saddle, his face grim and determined.

"The news, Dan?" he cried, eagerly, as the Regulators drew rein under shelter of the bluff.

"We have the swarm hived all right," Gold Dust Dan replied. "It is as I suspected, too. Our friend, the general, is deeply implicated, if he is not indeed the king bee."

"Dismount four of your men, Roy, and send three to the cabin to join Old Calamity, who is inside guarding the entrance to the cavern, while the fourth pushes on down the bluff to watch for a break from some other outlet."

Quickly Reckless Roy detailed the men, and while they hurried away he held a brief conference with the detective, during which they compared notes and decided upon a plan of action.

"We must search the foot of this bluff for another outlet," Gold Dust Dan declared. "The gang have horses, and there must be some cavern near in which they keep them."

"Roving Ruth spoke of such a cavern discovered by her bravos, which was used as a stable by General Grim, and we must now find it, for it is my belief there is a passage extending from this cavern to the one back of the cabin."

"It is quite likely," assented Roy. "And if we can discover the passage, our task of dislodging the general and his allies can be much more easily accomplished."

"Boys, search the face of the bluff closely, and if you find such a cavern, signal Dan and me."

The three remaining Regulators hurried away, while Roy continued his conversation with Gold Dust Dan.

The search was brief, for within five minutes one of the men came hurrying back with the announcement that the stable had been found, and Gold Dust Dan went forward to reconnoiter the place.

Cunningly hidden indeed was that entrance to the outlaw's stable, for behind

the heavy growth of vines masking the outlet hung a sheet of weather-beaten canvas, so nearly the color of the rocks themselves as almost to defy detection.

"Et war a lucky stumble as sent my hand ag'in' et, boss," one of the men explained, "an' on'y fer thet we'd be lookin' yet."

"Lucky, indeed," Dan averred, "for it is skillfully hidden, and might be passed a thousand times without detection in the shadow of these vines."

"But, follow me, boys, and we'll learn the secrets of this den."

And, jerking both vines and canvas aside, the detective strode into the cavern.

Prompt as had been his action, he was too late. A mocking laugh, the flash and crack of a revolver in a distant recess, a heavy, jarring sound, and the secret of the cavern was lost.

"They've run out the horses and blocked the passage," exclaimed the detective. "Pards, they have taken the trick, and we are cuchered!"

Leaving a man on guard at the cavern entrance, Gold Dust Dan and the others rejoined Reckless Roy.

"Merciful Heavens! he is killed!"

In accents of bitterest agony these words rang from the quivering lips of Media Bradlow, as she beheld the young Regulator reel and fall from his saddle.

"Steady, girl! steady!" hoarsely ejaculated John Bradlow, with a desperate clutch at his sister's swaying form. "Don't fall!"

But the mischief was done, and that caution fell upon heedless ears. With a low moan Media slipped from the ledge into the arms of her brother.

"Dead or fainting?" the captive gasped, weakly staggering under the weight of the burden he was so illy able to bear. "Dead or fainting, sister mine? Oh, God! that I were free to wreak vengeance upon these heartless devils!"

That thought, just then, infused new life, new energy, into his wasted form, and he gently laid the girl on the cavern floor and lifted her head upon his knee.

"Not dead! not dead!" he muttered, peering sharply into that white, pinched face. "The shock has robbed her of consciousness."

Mechanically he set about the work of resuscitation with the limited means at his command, bathing her face and temples with cold water, and chafing her wrists with feverish eagerness, until, with a long, low sigh, she opened her eyes and gazed wonderingly at her surroundings.

A shudder convulsed her slight form and she covered her face with her hands.

"Oh, he is dead! he is dead!" she moaned.

"Calm yourself, Media," urged Jack Bradlow, gently. "Explain yourself. Who is dead?"

"Roy."

"That shot, then—"

"That shot killed him!" Media declared, suddenly sitting up. "He threw up his hands and fell from his horse."

"But perhaps he was only wounded," suggested Bradlow, hopefully.

Media's eyes kindled, and she sprung to her feet; but, further action or conversation was cut short by the abrupt appearance of General Grim and two of his men.

The hunchback's right wrist and hand were tightly bandaged, and his face was white and drawn with pain.

"Knock the irons off the critter, boys!" he ordered, dancing madly about. "Waugh! but that mad devil's bullet burns! But, I'll have revenge—deuce roast him!"

"Now bind their hands behind them and gag and blindfold them! Be careful, too, for the least slip now may ruin us."

"You are going to take us away?" ventured Media.

"Ask me no questions, and I'll tell you no lies," was the sneering response. "Let it suffice that you shall not escape."

"Brag is a good dog, but you're a poor cur!" John Bradlow retorted, suddenly slipping forward and dealing the wretch a kick which sent him howling out of the way. "That as a sample of the hour of our reckoning!"

The glow in the blue eyes of the captive boded ill for the hunchback, but the grasp of the outlaws prevented further pursuit, and he quietly submitted.

"Upon him! strike him down!" roared General Grim, capering wildly about in commingled rage and pain. "The whip! the whip! I'll lash his back until the red blood flows!"

"Ye'll do nothin' o' the kind, Hunchy!" the larger of the outlaws exclaimed, turning savagely upon the general. "Ye got on'y a small taste o' what ye deserve, an' what ye'll git of ye mix up in this hyar percession! Time's money; so shet up yer tomfoolery an' keep out o' ther way. Mind that, now!"

With the look of a demon upon his face General Grim strode away, his long sword clanking dismally at his side.

"We've got ter change quarters, mum," the outlaw continued, addressing Media. "I can't tell ye whar we're goin', but ye won't be no wuss off than ye aire hyar—thet's sure."

Then in silence the task of the desperadoes was completed, and captives and captors quitted the cavern.

"Et's a calamitous misfortune we didn't ketch ther hull capoodle out in ther open sum'er's," Old Calamity grumbled, as he sat in council with the Regulators. "We've got 'em holed good an' fast, but ter git 'em out—thet's ther question."

"They're on the alert, sure enough, and could pick us off one by one going through that hole," observed Reckless Roy. "Yet that seems our only chance, and at sunset I'll make the venture."

"If something don't turn up," supplemented Gold Dust Dan. "I can't help but feel that they have a way of retreat left open, and I'll venture a new hat that when we do enter the cavern we'll find it deserted."

No one accepted the proffered wager, and after a moment of silence Old Calamity rose to his feet, saying:

"I'm goin' arter Pepper, an' while I'm about it I'll take another squint along ther top o' ther ridge."

"Go 'long, Dan'l?"

The detective nodded assent, and after a few words with Roy, mounted and rode away, carrying the mountain veteran behind him.

The cayuse was found patiently waiting where the old ranger had left it, and dismounting, the two men made their way to the top of the ridge, and thence to the point where Old Calamity had descended to the cabin roof.

"Dan'l, thar's suthin' derved strange in this hyar Cap'n Black business, an' I've bin a puzzlin' my head over et all day," the ranger remarked, as he gazed at the scene below. "Pears es of ther gang must be a part o' ther ole Red Panther outfit, eh?"

"It does, indeed, Calamity," the youth replied. "When the round-up comes, I shall not be surprised to find Red Panther himself the head devil of the crowd."

"Pshaw! Dan'l, he's dead!"

The detective slowly shook his head.

"This work looks very much like his," he averred. "If you remember the day of the clean-up at Gold Gulch, Calamity, you will recall that Red Panther and his lieutenant seized the balloon, cut loose and

made their escape, and that when the wrecked balloon was found there was only one corpse with it."

"An' thet war Red Panther, Dan'l."

"Are you sure?"

"Et war dressed as Red Panther dressed."

"Yes; but might not the chief have compelled his lieutenant to exchange clothes with him during their flight? That thought has occurred to me often of late, Calamity, and, in the light of past events I believe that in that exchange we shall find the solution of the mystery."

"I believe that Austin Ransome is Jacob Rose, or Red Panther. There is that about him in his voice, his face, and his gestures which awoke my suspicions the very moment I saw him."

For a full minute Old Calamity stared hard at the detective. Then a chuckle broke from his lips, and he gave his thigh an expressive slap.

"Putt et thar, Dan'l!" he exclaimed, extending his hand. "Ye've got it es straight es a string, fer—"

A deep groan near by checked the ranger's utterance, and both men wheeled, revolvers in hand.

"Help! help!"

Guided by that faint call, Gold Dust Dan leaped forward, closely followed by his old adjutant.

In the midst of a small thicket a few paces distant lay the body of a man, his life blood oozing rapidly away through a gaping wound in his breast.

One glance at the white, pain-distorted face, and Calamity started back with the ejaculation:

"Gabe Pyatt! by ther eternal!"

CHAPTER XV.

DORRIT'S TRICK.

Let us now follow for a brief space the fortunes of Bolly Dorrit, the veteran detective.

True to his promise to Gold Dust Dan, he quitted the camp of Roving Ruth at an early hour, to return to Deadwood and hold Austin Ransome under espial.

That this task would prove a most perilous one the veteran little doubted; but he was well armed, a stranger to fear, cool, shrewd, and calculating, and felt that if it came to the worst he would be able to outwit his foes or fight his way clear.

Yet he was determined to take every precaution against recognition, and as he rode along he carefully outlined a plan of action.

Two miles out of Deadwood he quitted the trail and rode slowly down the channel of a small stream.

A little after three o'clock that afternoon a short, heavily-built man, with a florid face, bristling gray mustache and imperial and closely-cropped gray hair, walked slowly and pompously through the main street of Deadwood.

That the Black Hills metropolis was new and strange to him was apparent to all, and his costly apparel and dignified mien quickly attracted attention, which he seemed to court rather than to shun.

His raiment was of broadcloth and linen, a natty silk tile covered his bullet-shaped head, and patent leather shoes his feet. Diamonds flashed from his shirt-front and his pudgy fingers, and gold-rimmed eyeglasses sat astride his short and bulbous nose.

Straight up the street, with the dignified, leisurely carriage of a man at ease with the world, he strode, until his eyes encountered a small, swinging sign bearing the words:

"JOHN H. HAMPTON,

"Attorney at Law.

"Office Upstairs."

"The very thing," the stranger muttered, in an undertone, after a close inspection of the sign, and he at once mounted the stairs and entered the lawyer's office.

A small, wiry old man, smooth shaven and gray headed, rose from a seat at the window overlooking the street, and, bowing, advanced to greet his caller.

"Mr. John H. Hampton, sah?"

"The same, sir."

"I Gawd! sah, I'm glad to meet a member of our profession, sah, in this benighted land."

"But permit me to introduce myself, sah."

"I am Judge Ebenezer Hangan, sah, formerly of southern Kaintucky, but now of Indianapolis, Indiana, sah."

"You do me an honor, sir, in calling," the little lawyer responded, extending his hand with a cheery smile. "Be seated, judge, and consider yourself at home."

Judge Hangan accepted the invitation with profuse thanks, and then the two men fell into an easy conversation, which had lasted perhaps an hour, when Hampton produced a demijohn and glasses, and the two waxed confidential.

Night had fallen when the judge took his departure, and it was with steps far from steady that he made his way to the nearest hotel and secured quarters.

Once within his room, safe from prying eyes, a remarkable change came over Judge Hangan. The half-drunken leer left his round, red face, his blue eyes brightened as if by magic, and he sat bolt upright in his chair.

"It's as clear as day," he mused. "Hampton has been in correspondence with Black, Stone & Cokely, of Indianapolis, and through him Ransome has come into possession of the facts relating to the Bradlow estate, enabling him to waylay Melville A. Cokely and secure the papers."

"But to prove it—that's the rub!"

The judge retired early, and was up with the break of day. After a hearty breakfast, he left the hotel, and spent the forenoon in visiting several promising claims in the vicinity.

Immediately after dinner, he made his way straight as the bee flies to the office of Lawyer Hampton.

That worthy was in, seated just as the judge had found him the preceding day, a nod with a gesture invited his visitor to a seat.

"I have called on business to-day," the judge explained, seating himself and abruptly dropping the dialect peculiar to the character he had assumed. "It is of a confidential nature. May I trust in your discretion?"

"Certainly, sir, and I beg to assure you that my professional honor has never before been questioned," Hampton exclaimed, his startled air giving place to a peculiar stiffness of manner.

"Very good, sir—very good, indeed," the judge responded, resting his pudgy, jewelled hand upon his knees and bending forward, his keen eyes fixed steadily upon the flushed face of the lawyer. "Allow me to say that I believe that you are the soul of honor, but at times indiscreet."

"When the wine is in, the wit is out."

"What—"

"Compose yourself, sir; compose yourself," the judge coolly interrupted, meeting the glare of the irate man with undaunted assurance. "Understand, once for all, I am not here to quarrel with you, but to help you repair, so far as possible, an error which you have committed in the manner I have just suggested."

"I refer to the matter of the Bradlow estate."

Again the lawyer started, and a peculiar expression came over his face.

"What is wrong? Who are you?" he demanded, rising to his feet.

"There is a great deal wrong. Information has leaked out at this end of the line, and Black, Stone & Cokely's special messenger, bearing important documents in the case, has been murdered and robbed of the papers by Captain Black, with the result that Media Bradlow has been abducted."

"I am Bolly Dorrit, and—"

"Not the mountain detective?" ejaculated Hampton, suddenly resuming his seat.

"Yes, the mountain detective," pursued Dorrit, "and I represent the friends of the girl."

"Let it now suffice that my attention was drawn to you by words the messenger uttered before dying. Careful inquiry has developed other points, and I came to you yesterday as Judge Hangan, of Indianapolis, to put to a test a certain theory I had formed."

"Do you remember, in detail, what occurred last night, Mr. Hampton?"

"I do not," the lawyer groaned, covering his face with his hands.

"Well, you drank a great deal more than was good for you; you became communicative, and betrayed the full extent of your knowledge of the Bradlow case, dwelling upon its peculiar features and disclosing the fact that you were daily expecting a member of the Indianapolis firm with the papers."

"Yes—yes!" faltered Hampton, rising from his chair and moodily pacing to and fro. "Mr. Dorrit, it is the old story—a life ruined by liquor. This is not my first lapse, but one of many which have driven me from pillar to post. I do not ask your indulgence. I am guilty!"

"But command me if there is anything I can do to—to assist you."

"You can assist me," Dorrit returned. "You can name the men of Deadwood with whom you have been on convivial terms, so to speak."

The lawyer reflected a moment, then turned, and with pallid face and trembling hands drew his chair nearer that occupied by the detective, and sat down, saying:

"My case is a peculiar one. I am what is known as a solitary drinker, and have never drunk at a public bar, and seldom with a companion. It is this fact which will enable me to identify positively the man to whom I have betrayed my professional secrets."

"His name is Austin Ransome. He is—"

"That is enough—I know him!" broke in Dorrit, with a chuckle. "I am greatly obliged to you, Hampton. You have confirmed a suspicion."

The lawyer looked bewildered.

"Surely, you do not think—"

"A whole heap? Yes, that's it. Compose yourself, man, dear. I want you to tell me some things about this Austin Ransome, and then I expect you to make him acquainted with Judge Ebenezer Hangan, of Indiana."

"Is he in his office now?"

"I do not think so," and the lawyer glanced through the open door at the rude hall beyond.

"Do you know where he keeps his private papers?"

"In a small safe in his office."

"And he sleeps in the room back of his office?"

"Yes. But surely you—"

"I just want to know," laughingly explained the detective, and then footsteps sounded on the stairway.

"Ten to one it's Ransome," the lawyer exclaimed, in guarded tones.

"Quick! your bottle and glasses."

Hampton was quick to catch the hint that terse sentence conveyed. With noise-

less celerity he produced the desired articles, and seated himself at a small table, opposite to the position assumed by Dorrit.

Just in time was that deft change in the scene accomplished, for as the detective filled his glass a tall, black-bearded man appeared in the doorway.

It was Austin Ransome.

Lawyer Hampton was equal to the emergency, and in another minute the detective's wish had been gratified.

"Now, gentlemen, let's drink to a more intimate acquaintance," suggested Hampton. "Ransome, I predict that Judge Hangan will prove a valuable acquisition to Deadwood, financially speaking, at least. He is seeking mining investments, and but a moment ago I referred him to you."

"I shall be pleased to render the judge any assistance in my power," Ransome returned, and then all three drained their glasses.

A few minutes of conversation ensued, and Hampton had just proposed another drink, when Austin Ransome sank limply back in his chair.

"By Heavens! the man is dying!" the lawyer cried, dropping the bottle in alarm. "I'll call—"

"Steady!" warned Dorrit, his firm grip closing upon Hampton's arm. "He is in no danger at all. He is simply doped, and will remain unconscious a half hour—no longer."

"Close the door."

"Surely you do not intend to—"

"Intend to see those papers," was the stern response. "I can afford to take no false step in this matter."

Mutely the lawyer obeyed.

A brief search of Ransome's pockets brought to light a number of keys, and without further ado the detective quitted Hampton's office and unlocked the one across the hall.

Twenty minutes had elapsed when he returned, and there was a triumphant gleam in his keen blue eyes.

"They're there, and enough to criminate him, but not to prove him Captain Black," he announced, as he returned the keys to Ransome's pockets.

"Act well your part, Hampton. He must not suspect."

Moved by a will stronger than his own, the lawyer bowed in acquiescence.

A moment later Ransome sat up, a look of bewilderment on his dark face.

"What happened?" he muttered, thickly.

"You fell in a fit, or a faint," Hampton explained. "Get up and walk about. You need exercise, man."

Ransome arose, and stretched himself like one waking from a long sleep.

"It is strange; I feel all right now," he remarked, and then, after a few words with the pseudo-judge, he took his departure.

A half hour later Dorrit, accompanied by Hampton, set forth to swear out a warrant for the arrest of the speculator.

In this there was considerable delay, and when the detective and the marshal finally reached the office of Ransome armed with the necessary document, disappointment awaited them.

The bird had flown.

The safe stood open, rifled of its contents, and the room was in a state of dire disorder.

Inquiry developed the fact that Ransome had quitted the building by the back way, accompanied by the redoubtable Buckskin, who was travel stained and dusty, as if from a long ride.

"The jig is up!" uttered Dorrit, in disgust, and leaving the pursuit to the marshal, he returned to the hotel.

There a note addressed to Judge Ebenezer Hangan awaited him.

It read as follows:

"Bolly—If you desire to be in at the death, ride at once to Skeleton Gulch, ten miles west of Deadwood."

"GOLD DUST DAN."

"The jig is up—for Captain Black!" amended Dorrit, and ten minutes later he was in the saddle, galloping westward.

CHAPTER XVI. SKELETON GULCH.

"Ah! It is you!" Gabe Pyatt weakly exclaimed, as his eyes encountered the face of Old Calamity.

"Yas, Gabe, et's me, an' you do seem a tarnal sight wuss off than I left you," returned the ranger, sinking upon his knees to examine the outlaw's wounds. "I reckon ther hunchback did this?"

"Yes, it is the general's work," was the low-voiced reply. "He has killed me."

"Ye do need a sky pilot, sartain sure, Gabe!"

Pyatt's half-closed eyes gleamed viciously.

"No, no!" he exclaimed, lifting his head a trifle. "Let it answer that that devil's sword has reached a vital point, and that my heart rankles with a fierce, hot longing for vengeance."

"He has killed me! I will destroy him! Listen!"

"The general and his band have escaped from the cavern, and, with the captives, are seeking a new retreat. The—"

"Which way, man?" interrupted Gold Dust Dan, eagerly.

"Be patient, and you shall know all," the fellow returned, peering sharply at the face of the young detective. "Haste will only defeat your ends and mine, for, pressed too hotly, Grim will kill his captives and scatter his men to avert capture."

"No, no! You must use stealth and cunning—you must listen to me and do exactly as I say."

"Has either of you ever been at the place known as Skeleton Gulch?"

"I hev," Old Calamity returned. "Thet is, ef ye mean ther gulch o' thet name about ten miles west o' Deadwood."

"It is the same. Well, the gulch is popularly supposed to be a mere pocket, or blind canyon, in the rocks. And it was so originally, but Captain Black has blasted a passageway from the gulch to a basin of peculiar formation, lying a hundred feet, perhaps, north of the gulch itself. This basin is known, I believe, only to members of the band. Ages ago, it may have been a lake, fed by a small stream which now pours in over the rocks from the north, crosses the basin, and finds an outlet under the cliff forming the southern boundary."

"This basin contains, perhaps, a half dozen acres of land, on which three cabins have been built—two recently, the other years ago."

"I am perfectly familiar with every feature of the spot, for it was there I took up my abode years ago, an exile—a fugitive; and it was there Captain Black found me less than a month ago and compelled me, under pain of death, to become a member of his band. Life is dear to the lowest creature, and I yielded, that I might wait and watch for a chance to escape, for I had found gold and possessed enough to clear away the stain which had driven me into exile, and yet live like a prince the rest of my natural days."

"But the dream is ended, and naught remains but vengeance and restitution."

"The pass from the gulch to the basin is concealed with skillfully painted canvas, but may readily be found by one knowing the secret, while there is a second en-

trance, unknown to the outlaws, and it is the one through which you must strike."

"Ride to Skeleton Gulch, and divide your force, leaving enough men to hold the pass, then send the others up into the hills, so that they may approach the basin from the north. When they strike the stream of which I have spoken, they will find a waterfall, many feet in height, behind which is a cavern. From this cavern a tortuous passage leads down and opens behind the falls in the basin, a dozen feet above the level."

"Remember this, and you can strike Grim from the rear and save the captives; forget it, and they will surely perish, for he is a merciless devil."

"My gold is hidden in a recess of the lower cavern, beneath a large flat stone under a ledge in the western wall. With it you will find a paper explaining my crime, telling who I am, and the disposition I wish made of the treasure."

"Attend to this for me—follow the written directions carefully, and you will find yourselves well repaid."

"Et will be done, pardner—pay or no pay," assured Calamity, bluntly. "We aire honest men, an' never a cent will stick to our fingers."

The outlaw raised his head, and uttered a faint sigh. The end was drawing near.

"Strike to-morrow night," he continued, staring hard at the face of the old ranger through the deepening gloom. "To-morrow they will send a messenger to Captain Black in Deadwood. Watch the trail and you will nail the captain."

Silence came upon the little group, unbroken for several minutes save by the labored breathing of Pyatt; then Gold Dust Dan spoke.

"Can you tell me how the general and his gang quitted the cavern below us?" he asked.

"They came out upon this ridge," was the faint reply. "You will find the place not fifty feet away. It is covered with a huge flat stone."

"Another point: The general and the captain are brothers. Their rightful names I do not know, but the captain's headquarters are in Deadwood."

Then silence came again, and remained unbroken until a hoarse rattle in the throat of the outlaw announced the end.

"He's gone over ther range, Dan'l, an' he didn't go in peace," murmured Old Calamity. "Pore cuss! We must run a lariat around him an' slip him over ther cliff ter ther boys, an' they kin plant him while we look around a bit."

This suggestion was adopted, and, with a brief explanation to Reckless Roy, the body was lowered to the waiting Regulators for burial.

Then Dan and Old Calamity turned and groped about in the darkness until they came upon the flat stone concealing the upper entrance to the cavern.

It required the united strength of the two men to slip the huge slab aside.

A yawning cavity was disclosed.

"Pyatt told ther truth, sure enough, Dan'l," the ranger remarked. "We'll go git ther hosses, an' git back ter camp."

Dan assented, and the two at once quitted the ridge.

Skeleton Gulch was one of the wildest spots in the picturesque Black Hills. Barren rocks lay on every side. The slopes were steep and the summits craggy.

The gulch, apparently the mouth of a canyon, pierced the hills for perhaps the half of a mile, then ended in a wall of towering rock.

It had gained its grewsome name in the early days of the Black Hills gold craze, through the discovery by a party of prospectors of a number of human skeletons

at the foot of the cliff forming the inner end.

So much for the locality.

A night and a day have passed since the flight of General Grim from his den in the hills on Clearwater Creek, and night has again descended, robing the hills in a mantle of deepest black.

In a group near the mouth of the gulch, sitting their saddles firmly, as if awaiting a word of command, are a number of horsemen.

Thus, silent and motionless they stand, until a tall, heavily armed figure emerges from the deeper gloom of the gulch, and pauses at the head of the cavalcade.

"I have found the passage, and the way is clear, Lady Ruth," utters a voice which all recognize as that of Reckless Roy. "Follow me."

In silence that spectral cavalcade moves forward, the muffled hoofs of the horses giving forth no sound. Into the gulch then onward it winds, closely following the lead of the Regulator chief, until he finally halts close beside the eastern wall.

"Dismount!" he orders, in a guarded voice, and then disappears, seemingly through the solid rock.

Quietly, without so much as the jingling of a spur, that command is obeyed, and each rider takes his position at the head of his horse.

Slowly the minutes slip by, until the iron nerves of the waiting adventurers begin to tingle with excitement and anxiety. Then a section of the wall seems to slip aside, and the Regulator chief reappears.

"Forward, in single file! Wait for me at the end of the passage."

He steps to one side, and the cavalcade passes slowly onward. When the last man has entered, Reckless Roy carefully replaces the canvas blind, then hurries ahead to act as guide.

Two of the men, carefully instructed, are left to guard the inner end of the passage; the others, with Roving Ruth, follow Reckless Roy.

A hundred yards, thus, in the dense, black shadows of the towering walls, then the chirrup of a cricket is heard, and the party halts.

"It is Old Calamity," Roy announces, and a moment later the old ranger approaches, closely followed by the Regulators.

"We've pried out ther sitewation, Roy, while ye war gone, an' we do find thet ther captives aire in ther middle cabin," the ranger explains. "Now, that's nineteen of us, an' I moves thet we leave one man with ther horses, then break up inter three squads, an' each squad take a cabin."

"O' course, ther middle cabin must be taken fu'st, but ther others can be surrounded so as ter perwent ther escape o' any o' ther varlets."

"What say?"

"The plan seems good to me," avers Roy, simply.

The squads are hastily formed, and a leader for each is appointed. Then the forward movement begins, each squad guided by the light shining from the windows of the cabin assigned it.

The party advancing upon the middle cabin is led by Old Calamity. Beside him are Reckless Roy and Roving Ruth, while just behind them are two of the Regulators and one bravo—six in all.

Straight to the door they glide, and Old Calamity tries it, to find that it is barred within.

Then the ranger raps sharply with the butt of his revolver, and the voice of General Grim is heard, demanding:

"Who comes there?"

"Durango Dan, with a message from the Captain," promptly answers Roy.

A muttered curse is heard. Then the

bars rattle noisily, and the door swings open.

Swift as a brace of panthers, Reckless Roy and Old Calamity leap over the threshold, cocked revolvers in hand.

Just a breath of dazed surprise, then a hoarse yell bursts from the throat of General Grim.

"Trapped!" he shouts, his face working with furious rage, and with that cry he springs toward Media Bradlow, a knife gleaming viciously in his left hand.

Crack!

Just the one shot, but, ere the smoke lifts from the muzzle of Old Calamity's revolver, General Grim is down, with a bullet through his evil brain.

Two outlaws step forward, with their hands up, and are promptly made prisoners.

They are none other than our old acquaintances, Landlord Jerry and Sleek Sid.

Then, rescued and rescuers stand face to face, and a tremulous, joyous cry passes the lips of the beautiful hills mystery.

"John!" she cries. "Dear John!"

"My God! Ruth!" Bradlow answers.

CHAPTER XVII.

CONCLUSION.

On leaving the office of Lawyer Hampton, Austin Ransome crossed the hall and entered his own apartment.

His face wore a perturbed look, and he closed and locked the door with the air of a man expecting unwelcome visitors.

"There is something wrong—very much wrong," he murmured, thrusting the door-key into his pocket and hanging his hat over the key-hole. "Were I not positive that he perished in his cabin, I would suspect this Judge Hangan to be Bolly Dorrit in a new disguise.

"Affairs are not running right. Can it be possible that Dorrit got onto our scheme and warned Gold Dust Dan. Something has happened, or Bucksin would have reported ere this."

Rapidly, almost incoherently, yet in tones not louder than a whisper, the words fell from Ransome's lips as he moved toward the small safe, key in hand.

"I have been drugged—of that I am sure!" he continued, dropping upon his knees and thrusting the key into its socket, while his deep black eyes seemed to scan every feature of the room. "If so, some has been here. The safe will tell."

The key clicked in the lock. Slowly, he swung the door open and glanced within.

A breath of relief passed his lips.

"It is just as I left it!" he exclaimed, his voice growing firmer. "Yes, all is—"

A sharp gasp of surprise filled that hiatus, and he hastily clutched a small parcel of papers lying uppermost in the safe, and stepped to the window.

A single searching glance, and his face grew livid.

"Blood!" he ejaculated, staring hard at the round, telltale spot in the center of the outer fold.

"Some one has been here! The safe has been searched! I am in peril, and I must fly!"

A desperate look came into the speculator's face. Tossing the parcel upon a table, he drew and examined his revolvers.

"They shall never take me alive!" he muttered. "I'll give them the slip, if possible. If they pursue, they shall find my aim has not lost its cunning."

Approaching the door, he listened intently a moment.

"There yet," he mused. "When they go, I shall go."

With the stealth and silence of a thief in the night, he emptied the safe and ransacked the room. Naught of value—naught that might incriminate him, was left behind. Papers, money and a quantity of jewelry were hurriedly packed into a satchel, together with a black mask, a number of false beards, mustaches, and like articles.

Scarcely had this task been completed, when the sound of steps in the hall and upon the stairway announced the departure of Hampton and his strange visitor.

Out into the hall sprang Ransome, pausing only to close and lock the door; then he hurried to the rear of the building, where a narrow stairway led down into a sort of stable yard.

At the foot of the stairs the speculator hailed a rough looking fellow lounging about the stable.

"My horse, Patsy," he ordered, coolly lighting a cigar. "Be quick, too, for I have to ride down to Camp Ransome and back before night."

A grunt from the hostler as he disappeared within the stable was the only answer, and the speculator ran lightly up the stairs and hurried through the hall.

Just as he reached his office door a man came bounding up the front stairs.

Ransome started.

"Bucksin! By Heavens!" he ejaculated.

"Sure enough, cap," the outlaw returned, with an apprehensive glance over his shoulder. "Let's get inside. The deuce is to pay!"

Ransome unlocked and threw open the door.

"Explain, and quickly," he commanded, hastily, crossing the room and seizing his satchel. "The old boy is loose here, too."

Bucksin nodded coolly.

"I see," he remarked. "Well, it's like this: Reckless Roy's Regulators came up from Gold Gulch, joined hands with Roving Ruth's outfit, and pretty near cleaned us out at Camp Ransome, and we were compelled to fall back to Skeleton Gulch."

"About the same time, another party routed the general and his crew out of the den in the rocks, and they, too, are now at Skeleton Gulch."

"And the captives—what of them?" demanded Ransome, eagerly.

"Still in our hands, along with Gold Dust Dan, whom we managed to rake in during the skirmish down at the camp."

"Now, cap, the boys want you to join them at once, for they feel the need of your cool head and cunning hand."

"I'll go to them," the speculator declared. "The fact is, Bucksin, I'm in trouble here, and expecting arrest every minute. I was on the point of starting for the general's when you came up."

"Go, now, and await me at the clump of pines three miles west of town. It will be some time after nightfall when I reach there, for, in order to throw the detectives off the trail, I shall start eastward, and circle back."

"Good, enough, cap. But I left my horse in the stable below, and I'll skip at once with you, and leave the impression we're bound for Camp Ransome. Just out of town we can separate, and I'll wait for you at the pines."

To this Ransome agreed, and both quitted the building, and, a few minutes later, galloped out of Deadwood.

A mile from town they separated and rode in opposite directions, Ransome giving the satchel into Bucksin's keeping.

Arrived at the clump of pines, Bucksin dismounted and tethered his horse; then took up a position overlooking a considerable stretch of the broken country he had just crossed.

After an hour's vigil, his patience was rewarded. From the direction of Deadwood came a horseman, a short, bulky fellow, well mounted, and riding at break-neck speed.

As he neared the clump of pines, Bucksin uttered a peculiar whistle and arose to his feet.

The horseman instantly drew rein, and Bucksin advanced to meet him. After exchanging a few words, the rider struck spurs to his horse and galloped onward, while the outlaw returned to his covert, filled and lighted a pipe, and made himself as comfortable as possible.

The somber shade of the pines slowly deepened into night, and the minutes lengthened into hours, ere the ringing hoof-strokes of a horse announced Ransome's approach.

Mounting, Bucksin rode out of the pines and hailed the chief, and quickly they were riding onward, side by side.

Ransome was sullen and silent, and Bucksin made no effort to draw him into conversation.

At the end of an hour Skeleton Gulch was reached. The two riders were halted by the challenge of a sentry in the masked passage.

Promptly Bucksin gave the countersign and the two rode into the basin, where both dismounted and approached the middle cabin.

Thrusting open the door, Austin Ransome stepped across the threshold.

A singular scene met his gaze.

Ranged round the walls of the cabin, heavily armed, and with their faces covered with cowl-like masks, were nearly a score of men, while, bound to a heavy chair in the center of the room, with his chin bowed upon his breast in a dejected manner, was a prisoner.

Ransome's dark eyes flashed wickedly.

"Gold Dust Dan!" he exclaimed, in an exultant voice. "Good, my bravos! you have done well! That hound has been our bitterest, our most dangerous foe, but tonight he dies—dies by torture!"

"Look up, you miserable dog! Face your fate like a man, for this is your last night upon earth! Do you hear? Look up, I say!"

Mechanically the captive raised his head. Ransome started convulsively, and the hue of death came over his dark face.

"Bucksin!" he gasped, his voice sounding hoarse and hollow. "What trickery is this?"

"Merely a surprise party for your benefit, Captain Black!" uttered a voice behind him.

Swiftly the entrapped outlaw faced about.

A cocked revolver stared him straight between the eyes, and back of the leveled weapon was the determined face of Gold Dust Dan.

"A Roland for your Oliver, Captain Black," the young detective announced. "To help along the game, I traded places with Bucksin to-day, and here you are!"

A despairing yell burst from Captain Black, and his hands dropped to the butts of the revolvers in his belt. Swifter yet was the snap-shot of Gold Dust Dan, and the outlaw received his death wound.

Little more remains to be told.

A search of the cavern back of the waterfall brought to light the gold buried by Gabe Pyatt, together with the written statement of which he had spoken, and Old Calamity and Gold Dust Dan faithfully executed the pledge made to the dying outlaw.

Captain Black's band were duly brought to trial, and all received their merited punishment. In due course Roving Ruth became Mrs. John Bradlow, while the fair

Media became the bride of Reckless Roy, the Regulator chief.

Bolly Dorrit, the veteran detective, still haunts the mountains, ferreting out criminals in his own peculiar way, while Old Calamity and Pepper, when last heard from, were mixed up in the "calamitous misfortune" at Wounded Knee.

Gold Dust Dan continues his career as a detective, and is to-day a terror to evil-doers in the great new West.

THE END.

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